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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY MUSIC RADIO FORMAT

by

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MASTER OF ARTS

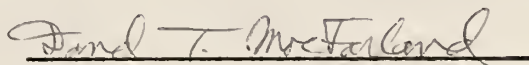
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Radio is a fundamental, intimate part of the lives of most Americans. They wake up to it, dress according to the weather forecasts it reports and drive to work steering clear of areas the radio traffic reports tell them to avoid. Radio is used to cover outside noise, for relaxation or for companionship throughout the day. At night, people study, write letters, play poker and eventually fall asleep with the radio on.

The early history of radio is well documented, however the more recent history of radio has been slighted. In the late forties and early fifties, television developed and became a much more visible subject for researchers and writers alike. Radio has been taken for granted more and more since the advent of television.

Because radio is so pervasive, it's all but ignored. While numerous scholarly books, reviews and features have been written about television, next to nothing has appeared about radio. Marshall McLuhan, in his Understanding Media, comments that "...so extraordinary is this unawareness that it is what needs to be explained. The transforming

power of (radio) is easy to explain, but the ignoring of this power is not..."¹

Before radio can be completely examined and understood, the history of every form of radio must be written. The problem which this thesis means to attack is the dearth of information available to researchers and students of broadcasting about the development of specific radio formats. In particular, this thesis will demonstrate how one radio format--country music--developed and grew into one of the handful of mass appeal radio formats of this day.

This thesis is not intended to be a guide or a how-to manual for the development of future formats, but simply an historical review. Its special usefulness will be the preservation of a part of the history of broadcasting.

It has been mentioned to the author by several people, including historians, that a work of this nature can make a real contribution to the study of broadcasting because many of the pioneers of the format are approaching death. It is important to get as many first-hand reports as possible before we are left to depend on second generation stories that may or may not be complete and accurate.

¹Jan Hoffman, "Vin Scelsa's Radio Free Radio," Village Voice, February 19, 1979, p. 40.

A Search of the Literature
And the Contribution of This Thesis

After consulting the Library of Congress computerized card catalog; the New York Public Library card catalog; the Manhattan Public Library and Kansas State University Library card catalogs, the writer is confident no books have been written on the development of the country music radio format.

Dissertation and thesis indexes have been consulted, as have the Journalism Abstracts and other relevant indexes, along with journals such as the Journal of Broadcasting. No evidence can be found that any serious research has ever been undertaken on the development of the country radio format.

There have been studies of stations that played country music as well as studies on the music itself, but there does not appear to be any scholarly thesis-length work that describes how this particular radio format developed.

The lack of scholarly work on the subject is further evidence of the need for a thesis such as this one. The contribution this thesis makes to the study of mass communications will be the preservation of a portion of radio history.. It is sometimes said we must know where we have been before we can know where we will go. Although this is not necessarily true in

radio, it has been the experience of this writer that knowing the history of country radio can provide a perspective on what is happening today. There are calls within the industry to return to the old days of country radio broadcasting. By knowing what those days were really like and why the country format has progressed to where it is today, a modern programmer will be better able to judge whether or not a return to the early days of the format would be a favorable move.

The number of country disc jockeys and programmers who began their careers in country radio is small. Most of them are rock or pop radio people who have been converted to country radio. This thesis could dispell the stereotypes which many would-be country disc jockeys and programmers now carry with them when they enter the world of country radio. It might also allow them to communicate more effectively with their audiences. This writer's programming and announcing style would certainly be different after having researched this subject than it was two years ago, when he last worked as a country disc jockey.

Methodology

Historical method involves careful examination of facts, and the writer intends to compare written

material gleaned from books and magazine articles with testimony derived from personal interviews with people who helped build country radio into one of the popular radio formats of this age.

Much general data can be found in library research, but personal contact with the people who actually developed country radio is necessary in order to discover where ideas came from and how the diffusion of innovation took place.

There are some discrepancies in the written material that comparison with original interviews by the author can clear up. For example, reference is made to David Pinkston putting the first all-country radio station on the air in 1953 in Lubbock, Texas. Other evidence shows Pinkston's station was still programming some popular music as late as 1955. A 1953 Sponsor magazine survey revealed seven stations which claimed to be all-country. A conversation with Mr. Pinkston should reveal the reason he is credited with being the owner of the first all-country station, if indeed he should be.

An exhaustive search of the literature has revealed a need for someone to make contact with as many of the format pioneers as possible, for it has apparently not yet been done. Even the most obvious leaders in the country radio field have yet to have

their memories recorded and their claims to fame verified.

In the literature, names of people who are credited with being pioneers in the development of the country format are mentioned many times. While country radio includes hundreds of stations and thousands of people, there are a few stations and a few people who are considered by others to be leaders.

Some of these people have passed away. Charles Bernard, who was trying to sell country radio to national advertisers in the fifties, died within the last year. And Harold Krelstein, who was chairman of Plough Broadcasting and took country music into Chicago, Boston, Atlanta and Tampa on a full-time basis in the mid-sixties, passed way just recently. The loss of these two men alone supports the argument that the timeliness of this research is more important than ever.

On the basis of the national publicity these country leaders have received, as well as the number of people in the field who suggested their names to the writer, as many as possible who could be contacted, were, and their thoughts, memories, reflections and philosophies are recorded in this thesis.

Attempts have been made to substantiate the claims of all these people, but there are things which

simply cannot be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. However, it is considered by the writer to be important to record the comments of these pioneers, back them up with whatever supporting evidence can be found, but not leave out unsubstantiated claims if they appear to be plausible and correspond with the rest of the evidence.

While trade publications have kept up to date on developments in radio, and these magazines will be referred to often, very little is published about the country music format. This thesis hopes to rectify that situation by pulling together all of the scattered bits and pieces of information that have been published and along with the interviews mentioned above, tell the story of country radio's development from the days of the barn dance to the present.

The development of country radio has several distinct phases. The pre-disc jockey days of the barn dance in the twenties and thirties laid the foundation for many stations that programmed country music on a limited basis when the disc jockey era began in the mid-forties.

Many radio stations had at least one country record program on the air in the mid-forties when disc jockeys began taking over the airwaves with their records and chatter. It was during this period that the specialty disc jockey emerged, including the country

air personality.

The all-country radio stations--defined as a station that programs exclusively country music, along with normal amounts of news, sports and religion--developed out of the earlier country music programs. The first evidence of the existence of an all-country radio stations appears in 1949.

Refinement of the country music format began in the early sixties with the sound of the country station changing in terms of music and presentation. Adoption of this refined format in the large markets began in the mid-sixties, and total acceptance in urban American was completed in 1973 when WHN, New York, changed to an all-country format.

The growth in the number of all-country radio stations has begun to slow today as most markets have been saturated with country music by now. The only changes in country radio marking the last half of this decade are in the music. Some stations are attempting to attract more listeners by broadening their music base.

All of these phases in country radio's development will be explored and analyzed in this thesis. While the thesis will be restricted as much as possible to programming policies, it is inevitable that some discussion of management, audience and advertising will take place. However, only when these areas relate to

the development of the format will they be mentioned. It is impossible to narrow the topic too much, as nearly every aspect of radio broadcasting is connected with the country format. But such areas as news and public affairs, station organization and engineering will be glossed over in favor of concentration on programming policy.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY COUNTRY MUSIC ON RADIO

Country music (sometimes called folk, hillbilly or old-time music) has been heard on the radio for nearly as long as the medium has existed. Late in 1922, Fiddlin' John Carson entertained on WSB, Atlanta, in what most researchers agree was the first performance of a country artist on radio. Many southern radio stations began broadcasting country musicians, who came to radio by way of vaudeville or minstrel circuits or from rural areas and mountaintops. Most of the early musicians performed for free on the radio in order to publicize their personal appearances.

Prior to these broadcasts on radio, few people had heard country music except at neighborhood or family gatherings, or when the vaudeville and minstrel shows came through their areas. Record companies recorded very few hillbillies, thinking the popularity of such material would not be great enough to justify the expense.

Country music was not considered refined enough, as the recording industry produced mainly for urban

audiences. The thinking was that only rural people would enjoy country music if anyone would.¹

The success of radio forced the record companies to expand their record catalogs because many people quit buying records of music they could hear on the radio for free.² In the early 1920s the companies began to produce jazz (called race music) and country music for regional distribution. Only after a few country music radio programs demonstrated the popularity of country music did record companies begin earnestly searching for talent to record, beginning about 1924. (On one such talent hunting expedition the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers were discovered within two days of each other.)

Because of radio the country singer became a commercial performer, and when he got the chance to show off his skill, he tended to stress those techniques which most pleased his radio listeners.

It appears that from the earliest days of country music broadcasting on radio, country artists were using radio to gauge how they should alter their music in order to create a larger following. It is impossible

¹Most of the record companies have since been accused of being "stuffy" when it came to deciding what musical forms should be recorded.

²Erik Barnouw, A Tower in Babel, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 129.

to deny that radio had something to do with the changes made in country music, because radio people surely had some influence on the way musicians presented their material. But the radio people and musicians were both working toward the same basic goal--building an audience.

Radio broadcast mostly music in the early 1920s and the music was almost all conservatory or "potted palm music."³ This music nearly dominated radio in the first few years and retained a leading role throughout the twenties. Country music was by-and-large unheard on many regularly scheduled broadcasts. As an example, Dallas station WFAA's 1928 schedule of programs, which is considered typical of the time, contained less than four percent music which could be classified as "country," and it was called "old-time fiddle music" at WFAA.⁴

Barn Dances

Much of the country music that was heard on radio in the 1920s was broadcast on "barn dances." These were usually regularly scheduled programs that were filled with fiddle and banjo solos, square dance music, rural comedy and country music. The television program "Hee Haw" might be considered a modern day version of

³Ibid., p. 126.

⁴Ibid., p. 127.

the old radio barn dance. The "Grand Ole Opry" is still broadcast every Saturday night on WSM, Nashville, and it was one of the earliest barn dances.

WBAP, Ft. Worth, has been credited with broadcasting the first barn dance on January 4, 1923. Few associate WBAP with the early barn dances, however, as theirs were not regularly scheduled until 1927. By then, other stations had begun weekly barn dances, and some others were no doubt featuring country music periodically, although not in the barn dance format. But WBAP, by introducing the radio barn dance concept, may have influenced the formation of such programs elsewhere. In the early days of unregulated radio transmitter power output, WBAP programs were picked up by people as far away as New York, Canada, Hawaii and Haiti, no doubt helping to trigger the wave of barn dances that began showing up on radio stations around the country.⁵

National Barn Dance

While many radio stations began or were starting their own versions of the barn dance show, few ever became as large or successful as the National Barn Dance on WLS, Chicago. Beginning in a small hotel studio on April 19, 1924, the National Barn Dance became one of

⁵George O. Carney, "Country Music and the Radio: A Geographical Assessment," The Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal, (April, 1974), p. 21.

the most important shows on WLS and in later years entertained thousands with live performances in Chicago's Eighth Street Theater along with millions listening at home. The show introduced the nation to many stars such as Gene Autrey, Jimmy Dean, Bradley Kincaid, and Homer and Jethro among others. One hour of the show was sponsored by Alka-Seltzer and broadcast on the NBC radio network from September 30, 1933, until April 28, 1946. It was the subject of a Paramount movie and during 1949-1950, Phillips 66 sponsored a thirty-minute segment of the show on ABC-TV.⁶

According to station manager Edgar L. Bill, no one person really created or planned the National Barn Dance. WLS started broadcasting with a variety of programs, like most stations. But, "when it came to Saturday night, it was quite natural to book in old-time music, including old-time fiddling, banjo and guitar music and cowboy songs. We leaned toward the homey, old-time familar tunes because we were a farm station primarily."⁷

In May, 1924, George D. Hay was hired as chief announcer for WLS. His duties included announcing for the National Barn Dance. Hay had an unusual style that

⁶George Biggar, "The WLS National Barn Dance Story: The Early Years," John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly, (part 3, 1971), p. 111.

⁷Ibid., p. 106.

apparently appealed to his listeners as he won the 1924-25 Most Popular Announcers' Contest of the Radio Digest by vote of the readers.

In 1930, when a time sharing arrangement with WENR, Chicago, gave WLS all of Saturday night to midnight and all weekday time from sign-on until 3:30P.M., the National Barn Dance went on for five hours on Saturday nights. According to George Biggar, WLS program director from 1930 to 1938, the show became the dominant program on the station. In order to keep the better acts from going elsewhere, WLS had to begin paying a liveable wage to its Barn Dance stars. To justify the higher wage, the station began using the Barn Dance acts on more programs. They were on in the mornings for fifteen or thirty-minute programs. They were also booked on the top farm audience noontime program five days a week, as well as on occasional afternoon programs. All this exposure along with regular promotional spots on WLS and in the Prairie Farmer (a weekly farm publication whose owner also owned WLS by this time), gave the National Barn Dance more promotion than just about any other radio program on the air.⁸

WLS continued to broadcast the National Barn Dance until 1960, when new owners brought a new format to

⁸Ibid., p. 109.

the station. The show moved to WGN for a short run before it finally expired.

The Grand Ole Opry

The National Barn Dance apparently lost little when its popular announcer George Hay was hired to manage Nashville's WSM on November 2, 1925. WSM had gone on the air on October 5, 1925, with one thousand watts of power--a very strong signal at that time--programming semi-classical music, some dance band tunes and a few old-time performers like Uncle Dave Macon, Dr. Humphrey Bate and Sid Harkreader.

The barn dance that has been on radio more years than any of the others began with a two-hour fiddle recital by Uncle Jimmy Thompson on November 28, 1925. Though, as noted above, country tunes had been heard on WSM before this date, it is this session that Hay calls the first of the long series of Grand Ole Opry shows. Like most stations that experimented with country music, the response was good enough to justify continuing the program. Also, knowing the WSM owners, National Life and Accident Insurance Company, wanted to publicize its new series of insurance policies for rural customers, Hay included the barn dance as a regular part of Saturday night programming in December, 1925.⁹

⁹Charles K. Wolfe, Tennessee Strings, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), p. 59.

In the beginning the Saturday program was simply referred to as the "Barn Dance," but George Hay soon christened the show the "Grand Ole Opry." Hay made the show as "downhome" as possible. All performers were required to dress like hillbillies for photo sessions, and Hay gave some of them names that were supposed to evoke rustic images.¹⁰ He fostered an image of informality and improvisation and tried to continue that look even when the show became more structured and formal.¹¹

During the first full year of the program, 1926, country music was the main feature, but other types of music were heard as well. In later years, such pop stars as Rosemary Clooney and Kitty Kallen made appearances at the Opry, and in the early 1950s even opera star Helen Traubel graced the stage.

Although the Saturday night Opry has always been the mainstay of WSM's country music programming, the station did not immediately begin broadcasting only country music. In fact, even by the 1950s, the station was only programming half of its time with country music. Even today, for all the credit it receives for helping push the development of country music and

¹⁰Names such as the "Possum Hunters," "Fruit Jar Drinkers," and the "Binkley Brothers Dixie Clodhoppers" illustrate the lengths Hay went to create his rustic images.

¹¹Wolfe, Tennessee Strings, p. 61.

country radio, WSM still programs popular music from 6A.M. to 6P.M., then country music all night.¹²

It was in Nashville in the late 1920s that competition for the country music audience first occurred. WDAD was on the air and programming some country music before WSM went on the air. The success WDAD had with country music may have been one factor that influenced George Hay to program country tunes on WSM. At any rate, WDAD and WSM competed for the country audience, with both stations broadcasting country music on the same night. Soon, Nashville stations WLAC and WBAW also entered the fray. The four stations generally programmed country music at different time periods, but sometimes more than one station would feature country music on the same night. For awhile in 1928, Nashville radio listeners could hear country music three nights in a row: WBAW played it on Thursday, WLAC on Friday, and WSM on Saturday. Within a few months WSM had the country audience to itself, as the other three stations decided either not to chase the country audience or that it was useless to compete with WSM for that audience.¹³

Regardless of the reasons for WSM winning out

¹²Standard Rate and Data Service, October, 1978.

¹³Charles K. Wolfe, The Grand Ole Opry: The Early Years, 1925-35, (London: Old Time Music, 1975).

with the "Opry," it can be safely concluded that by 1928 at least some of the radio stations in Nashville had realized the audience country music could attract. Otherwise, WDAD, WBAW and WLAC would not have competed with and "imitated" the "Opry."¹⁴

The "Grand Ole Opry," which today has become an institution, has never missed a Saturday night broadcast in the fifty-three years it has been on the air. George Hay, years ago, gave this explanation for the enduring success of the show:

The "Grand Ole Opry" is as simple as sunshine. It has a universal appeal because it is built upon good will and with folk music (it) expresses the heart beat of a larger percentage of Americans who labor for a living.¹⁵

As programming philosophies go, that one may be simplistic and to some even sophomoric in its simplicity. But Hay's explanation for the popularity of the show is no more simple than most reasons given for the popularity of country music by people ranging from scholars to the artists themselves.

The WWVA Jamboree

As radio grew, more and more barn dances took to the air. A show that is immensely popular today began on January 7, 1933 over WWVA in Wheeling, West

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵"A Radio Institution: WSM's Grand Ole Opry," Broadcasting, October 11, 1976, p. 46.

Virginia. Called the "WWVA Jamboree," the show began as a radio program and like many other barn dances, had to become a stage show to accommodate public demand. The first live show was at the Capitol Theater on April 1, 1933. One thousand people had to be turned away after 3,266 others packed the house.¹⁶

Although ratings of radio shows had been around for several years when the Jamboree went on the air (the Crossley service began in 1930), the "Jamboree" had a contribution to make in this area of the development of country music radio programs. The show proved its mailpulling power by attracting over 15,000 responses to a box top offer in three days. Advertisers began to recognize the possibilities in selling their products on such country music programs.

While good demographic studies which could describe to advertisers the make-up of their audiences were rare, country programs were beginning to prove to a few advertisers that the audience was large and, more importantly, they were very loyal. In addition, program time rates were low. Further, the ad people were able to use top live talent in promoting their goods. When stars of the WLS "National Barn Dance" or the "WWVA Jamboree" endorsed a product, the distributor of that

¹⁶All information on the "WWVA Jamboree" came from: "The Other Country Show: WWVA's Jamboree," Broadcasting, October 11, 1976, p. 46.

product usually made a tidy profit.¹⁷

Because the Jamboree featured mostly local musicians at a time when most other barn dances were attracting talent of national stature, the program became closely identified with the surrounding communities. During the great Ohio Valley flood in 1937, WWVA and Jamboree stars stayed on the air twenty-four hours a day with news bulletins and spirit-lifting entertainment. And during World War II, the stars sold bonds and raised money for the Red Cross and USO.

Renfro Valley Barn Dance

Another rather important barn dance was the "Renfro Valley Barn Dance" which began in 1937 on WLW, Cincinnati. The program's founder, John Lair, took the show to a real barn in Renfro Valley (sixty miles southeast of Lexington, Kentucky) in 1943 where he broadcast the live show over his own radio facility. Lair was interested in keeping old-time musical traditions alive, so he created an atmosphere of old-time neighborliness. His twenty-five performers would sing the old songs, tell the old jokes and dance the old hoedowns.¹⁸

¹⁷"Why Sponsors Hate to Leave the Barn Dance," Sponsor, (May 3, 1954), p. 106.

¹⁸"Music in Kentucky," International Musician, (May, 1952), p. 9.

Two other shows grew out of this Saturday night program. The Sunday morning "Getherin'" took place in a log school house and from there Lair would speak on such topics as "folks who try to live beyond their means" and "keeping the young ones out of mischief." The third program was called "The Country Store" and featured men hanging around the cracker barrel in a general store swapping stories and singing barber shop harmony. John Lair used to explain his radio programs as being simply neighborhood gatherings picked up by radio and taken into people's homes so they could join in the fun.¹⁹

Other Barn Dances

The importance of the barn dance shows mentioned so far lies in the fact that they all originated from high-powered stations.²⁰ By the thirties the stations carrying the mentioned barn dances became truly high-powered in terms of wattage. Because of this power, a large number of people, especially rural people, could receive the broadcasts.

These shows had no geographical boundaries. By the end of World War II, all sections of the United

¹⁹Ibid., p. 9.

²⁰In the twenties, the stations were not necessarily high wattage stations, but in those days, one thousand watts could cover half the country because of fewer stations and less interference.

States could hear country music on the radio. Some of the more important barn dances that continued to be aired into the 1950s included: WRVA, Richmond's "Old Dominion Barn Dance"; WSB, Atlanta's "Barn Dance"; WHAS, Louisville's "Old Kentucky"; WMC, Memphis' "Slim Rhodes"; KWKH, Shreveport's "Louisiana Hayride"; WML, New Orleans' "Arkansas Troopers"; KRLD, Dallas' "Big D Jamboree"; KPRC, Houston's "Curly Fox and Texas Ruby"; WOAI, San Antonio's "Rodeo"; WCCO, Minneapolis' "Saturday Night Party"; WNAX, Yankton, South Dakota's "Missouri Valley Barn Dance"; KOA, Denver's "Western Stampede"; KMBC, Kansas City's "Brush Creek Follies"; WHO, Des Moines' "Barn Dance"; WIBW, Topeka's "Kansas Roundup"; WOW, Omaha's "Jamboree"; WKY, Oklahoma City's "Merle Lindsay"; WLW, Cincinnati's "Midwestern Hayride"; and WJR, Detroit's "Big Earn Frolic". Additionally, the west coast was covered with a Bristol-Myers-sponsored show featuring country music with Jimmy Wakely which was heard on eleven Pacific radio outlets.²¹

It can be seen that barn dance shows on radio were the primary means by which country music grew in popularity in the first three decades of radio's history. By the early 1950s, with the idea of specialized

²¹ "Why Sponsors Hate to Leave the Barn Dance," Sponsor, p. 43.

radio formats beginning to develop, many radio stations were devoting part of their broadcast day to country music, and some were beginning to program nothing but country music (along with the normal amounts of news, sports and religious programs).

A survey conducted by Sponsor magazine in 1953 showed that 65 percent of all radio stations in the nation had a least one country music program on the air. Two hundred thirty-six programmed more than twenty hours a week of country music, and seven stations answered the survey saying their entire schedule was devoted to country music.²²

The important thing to point out now is the fact that country music, though in no way as prevalent on radio as pop music and network offerings, was available in almost every area of the country by the early 1950s. By then, country music programming was not limited to the barn dance type of show. Other factors which had contributed to the refinement of both the music and its presentation on the radio were responsible for the spread and growth in popularity of country music radio programming.

²²Ibid.

Refinement of the Music and the Medium

Considering the wide distribution of radio stations which featured hillbilly talent from the time the medium began its existence in the 1920s, and the loyalty of radio audiences to both shows and sponsors, one need not reiterate the importance of broadcasting in the expansion of country music. Country music probably reached the ears of most Americans via radio...Radio research will indicate that country music programming was not confined to the south nor to small towns, but we shall never know the complete nature and extent of country music broadcasting until a careful, day to day search of newspapers published in the 1920s is conducted.²³

It is difficult to find anyone who will disagree with what Malone says above, particularly when he states that radio was the key to the wider public acceptance country music had received. Previously mentioned in this thesis is the fact that record companies shunned country music until radio hurt their sales of popular recorded music and forced them to expand their offerings.

Country Music on Records

Two factors contributed in large part to the refinement of the country artist and his music. These are the recording of his songs and his radio appearances. Some say this was the commercialization of the folk art. Others refer to this period (late twenties and thirties) as the golden age of country

²³Bill C. Malone, "Radio and Personal Appearances: Sources and Resources," Western Folklore, (July, 1970), p. 219.

music, meaning a time of prosperity for the music and musician.

When the Depression took hold, many longed for the "good ole days" and country music appealed to the sense of nostalgia which the Depression created in people. The early 1930s marked a turning point in country music history. As record companies began feeling the economic impact of the Depression, some folded. But a bright spot emerged for country artists. Decca Records was formed and began earnestly recording country artists from the southwest and especially from Texas.²⁴

Until this time, most recorded country music came from the southeast. With Decca recording artists from Texas and the southwest came an expansion of country music. Western swing, honky-tonk and cowboy music all became branches on the tree known as country music.

In 1942 the American Federation of Musicians decided by unanimous vote, to stop making recordings. The result was that between 1942 and 1943, radio stations were forced to rely on older recordings for their program material.²⁵ Since by 1942, there was a good backlog of recorded country music, many stations played

²⁴Bill C. Malone, Country Music U.S.A., (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 104.

²⁵Barnouw, The Golden Web, p. 218.

these records to keep from becoming too repetitious during this period.

Music Licensing

There is one other part of the music business history that positively affected country music and that was the formation of Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI), in October, 1939. Nearly all copyrighted music was controlled by ASCAP, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers. For radio stations to be able to use this music they had to pay ASCAP a royalty which at the time, amounted to 2 1/8 percent of a station's gross income from sales. In 1937 ASCAP began talking about an increase in the amount broadcasters would be required to pay, beginning after 1939. With funds from radio stations, the National Association of Broadcasters began to build a group of publishers and songwriters to compete with ASCAP. It was not difficult to find publishers and songwriters who would join this new organization because ASCAP had always been rather discriminatory in its distribution of fees and its signing of songwriters. Many country songs were not licensed by ASCAP, and long-established writers were favored over younger ones when it came time to distribute the fees.²⁶

²⁶Ibid., p. 110.

BMI did not hesitate to license country songs, or anything else that came its way. Many younger writers left ASCAP and joined BMI. In 1941, ASCAP music went off the air as broadcasters staged a sort of strike in protest of ASCAP's demands for higher royalties. Stations relied on BMI and public domain music. Undoubtedly, more country songs were heard during this period, although it is impossible at this point to determine the extent of the increase. The important thing is more country songs were at least being licensed for airplay.

Country Music on Radio

The 1930s was a decade of expanding radio coverage of country music. Many stations in the south and midwest, probably spurred on by the success of the larger barn dances on WLS, WLW, WSM, WBAP and others, began broadcasting country music. While it is probably impossible to measure accurately the diffusion of early country music radio shows, even by the method suggested by Malone above, there is little doubt that when WBAP received the largest number of telegrams and phone calls ever experienced by the station for "Bonnor's Square Dance Show," other stations took notice.²⁷ In addition, there is no doubt that the high-powered Mexican border stations influenced a

²⁷Carney, "Country Music and the Radio," p. 30.

significant number of people with their country music programming.

Population Migration

Migration patterns began developing in the United States during the thirties with many southerners moving into the southwest and west. The people took their music with them and not only created a larger market for country radio programs, but exposed new neighbors to country music as well. Malone called this "the transplantation of a musical culture through population migration."²⁸

When World War II broke out there was more migration. Southerners moved to the north for the factory jobs and rural people moved to the city for the same reason. Many northern boys were trained for service in the south, and no doubt some of them left the south with an appreciation for the music of that region.

Country Radio and the War

The Armed Forces Radio Service, which formed during the early stages of the American involvement in the war, must also be given some credit for the dissemination of country music. In 1943 AFRS had twenty-one outlets and by the end of the year there

²⁸Malone, Country Music U.S.A., p. 139.

were 306 outlets in forty-seven countries. Every week each outlet was sent forty-two hours of recorded programming from the United States. Some of those programs featured country music including a weekly half hour "Grand Ole Opry" show.²⁹ It is difficult to imagine a soldier who by the end of the war had not been exposed to country music.

Malone feels that the war years rather than the thirties marked the beginning of country music's golden age. With many artists going on tour and helping with the war effort, they received more promotion on local radio stations than ever. The popularity of the "Grand Ole Opry" ballooned, and country music was on the verge of becoming a big business. By 1944 more than six hundred country music programs were being broadcast on radio around the nation.³⁰

By the end of the war, the Opry was an institution and country music was more than a regional phenomenon. "In less than ten years, dating back to the founding of BMI, country music had become an industry rather than simply a way for a burned out farmer to keep the blues away."³¹

²⁹Wolfe, Tennessee Strings, p. 75.

³⁰Malone, Country Music U.S.A., p. 194.

³¹Paul Hemphill, The Nashville Sound, (New York: Pocket Book, 1971), p. 104.

The Disc Jockey

Two important events occurred in radio that began shaping the image of radio's future. Prior to 1940, very few recordings were played on radio. Most of the programming had been live. Some artists stamped a warning on their records: "Not Licensed for Radio Broadcast," to keep their records from undermining their network contracts. A suit was filed and the court ruled in the broadcaster's favor, so that records could be played on the air regardless of what was stamped on the label.

The disc jockey, whose origin is somewhat cloudy, grew to prominence in the radio industry in part because of that court ruling. One of the primary problems for small, local stations was the expense of talent. All that was necessary for a disc jockey show was somebody who could tell time and play records. And the records were often supplied free. Thus, the disc jockey show succeeded partly because it was very inexpensive to produce.

When the war ended, many local radio operations had a completely different sound from a few years earlier. Specialized disc jockeys had begun to appear, including country disc jockeys, who could deliver specific portions of the market.³²

³²Barnouw, The Golden Web, pp. 217-219.

Billboard magazine, an entertainment industry publication, began a section on country music in 1942 called "American Folk Music." In 1944 the magazine introduced the first country charts in mid-year, labeled "Most Played Juke Box Folk Records." The industry was beginning to note the national prominence of country music. By 1949, Billboard renamed the chart "Country and Western." A news section called "Folk Talent and Tunes" that told about current happenings in country music and on country radio shows was also being printed.

This country section in Billboard was a valuable aid to country disc jockeys. From the charts, the jocks were able to find out what records and artists were most popular nationwide, and from the "Folk Talent and Tunes" column, they could keep up on what other people were doing and perhaps even steal a few ideas.

Radio Formats Rather Than Programs

Prior to the fifties, radio was programmed in blocks, much like the way television is programmed today. When television began luring away many of network radio's comedians, dramatists, etc. ratings for network radio shows fell drastically in a very short period of time. For example, Bob Hope's January ratings for the years 1949-1953 were: 1949--23.8; 1951--12.7; and 1953--5.4.³³

³³Barnouw, The Golden Web, p. 288.

The damage television did to network radio was combined with trouble which radio had brought on itself, by putting a vast number of new stations on the air after World War II ended.³⁴

The tremendous increase in the number of radio stations after the war led eventually to a fragmentation of the audience. It was this fragmentation that led to radio stations programming the same basic type of material all day long.

By the late 1950s, many radio stations had stopped trying to appeal to everyone. Thus, developed the radio format. Formats basically define the type of music a station plays. These formats include rock, jazz, classical, rhythm and blues, beautiful music and others. The all-country music station was one of the first specialized formats to appear.

³⁴In 1945 there were 930 licensed radio stations. By 1950 there were nearly three thousand and the number was growing daily.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BIRTH OF A FORMAT

When radio shifted from block programming to music and news formats, the stations began defining themselves according to the type of music they played. With the number of radio signals coming into most people's homes increasing weekly, a station had to do something to make its sound unique. Once the stations began to realize they could not be all things to all people, they divided up the audience according to the musical tastes of that audience.

Many radio stations in the United States had at least experimented with country music in one form or another by the early fifties. Some stations still had barn dances while others were featuring country record shows at different times during the day and night. Surveys of the radio industry indicated there were some fourteen-hundred country radio shows on the air in 1951. Geographically, the shows were spread from coast to coast--major cities and small towns. Helping spread the music to the hinterlands were some 50,000 watt stations "who, maintaining a twenty-four hour per day schedule, have in the majority turned to

hillbilly and western platter spinners for a major part of their all-night and early morning programming.¹

A Billboard magazine survey of five-hundred country disc jockeys² throughout the nation showed an average of eleven hours of country music per week was being programmed on those stations surveyed in 1951. Some jocks reported being on the air three to six hours a day with WCKY, Cincinnati; KMOX, Saint Louis; WRVA, Richmond, Virginia; WMPS, Memphis and WJJD, Chicago being among stations in that category.³

Why Country Music?

The first half of the 1950s was a troubling period for radio. Television had begun doing what radio had done successfully for years, but television provided the pictures as well as the sound. Fortunately for radio, America became a mobile society at just the right time. Radio capitalized on that mobility by becoming a more intimate, personal form of communication. In short, radio became America's companion. People could take radio anywhere and it was as much the new programming forms radio developed as it was the new

¹John Sippel, "The Hillbilly DeeJay Prime Asset to Country and Western Music," Billboard, September 15, 1951, p.61.

²A country disc jockey in the fifties was as much a programmer as he was disc jockey, making them different from today's disc jockey who has virtually no control over the records he plays.

³Sippel, "The Hillbilly DeeJay," p. 61.

technology that let people take radio on the road, beaches, lakes and other places out of the home--the traditional location for radio listening.

America was becoming a fast-paced society with no time to sit and listen to radio in long blocks of time. So, radio shortened everything and repeated it all. People had neither the time nor inclination to listen to a thirty minute newscast, but five minutes was tolerable and even if they missed part of the news, they could hear it later if they desired. The common denominator in radio became music.

Most people like music, in one form or another. For radio stations, whose success depends on the number of listeners they have, the battle was half won when they decided to let music make up the bulk of their programming. The difficult choice remained to be made, however. What kind of music should they program?

Prior success of barn dance shows along with the response some of the country music record shows received gave some station operators an opportunity to see the possibilities for success an all-country radio format could have. However, because of an image problem country music had, it is doubtful that very many operators were considering the all-country format. But something was happening in the industry that was to insure the success of the country format in some form.

Country Disc Jockeys Unite

It was Saturday November 21, 1953, in Nashville, Tennessee when a group of country disc jockeys met and formally created the Country Music Disc Jockey Association (CMDJA) at the 29th anniversary of the "Grand Ole Opry." This organization was formed to "more effectively aid the music business in all phases."⁴

That explanation should be expanded somewhat. The group was formed to help country disc jockeys get better treatment from record companies and to try to expand their brand of programming by demonstrating the success of other shows to their own station management. The Association met in 1954 and began a drive to "upgrade the appeal and image of country music."⁵

A membership drive through the group's first full year drove the number of country announcers in the Association from 100 to 215 members. This large increase in numbers strengthened the organization's clout with the music industry and helped them gain greater recognition for their brand of radio in the broadcasting industry.

The CMDJA actually grew out of a small group of

⁴"C&W Deeja's Organize," Downbeat, December 30, 1953, p. 17.

⁵"Country Music Disc Jockey Association to Hold Its First Annual Session," Billboard, November 13, 1954, p. 14.

country jocks who met through the columns Johnny Sippel wrote every week in Billboard called "Folk Talent and Tunes." It was through these weekly columns that country disc jockeys could find out what other members of their somewhat limited breed were doing. Program ideas and philosophies were transmitted around the nation via this one column.

Country Disc Jockey Hall of Famer Biff Collie claims:

"...that column was as big a factor as anything else I know. That's how we guys started getting together. The guys who read that column found common ground and became acquainted with each other's names, then began corresponding through the mail and sometimes by phone. Finally there was an agreement that we would get together in Nashville in November of 1950 and go to the Opry and sit around and talk about country music and radio. Not more than fourteen or fifteen of us met there for the first time and got drunk and visited and whatever else we did. The next year there were probably thirty or forty of us. Then the third time we got together [1952] there were around seventy and WSM claimed they sponsored us. That was the beginning of the "Grand Ole Opry" celebration.⁶

The 1953 edition of the anniversary celebration was attended by over four hundred jocks and industry people, and the party was on its way to being an annual event that today attracts thousands.

The importance of these celebrations cannot be

⁶Telephone interview with Biff Collie, columnist for Radio and Records, Nashville, Tennessee, 29 January 1979.

overlooked. For the first time a large group of disc jockeys was able to meet and exchange ideas on a one-to-one basis. Other specialty type jocks (such as rock disc jockeys) had yet to meet in such groups. The importance of the meetings grew the next year when a disc jockey clinic was added to the program. This clinic gave jocks a chance to air complaints about treatment by record companies and "pick up valuable information on record programming and ideas for promoting their own shows."⁷

That 1954 celebration received nationwide recognition when the NBC television and radio networks originated shows from the festival. NBC repeated the programs from Nashville in 1955 when there were over fourteen hundred country disc jockeys and country music representatives in attendance.

The Country Music Disc Jockeys Association met at the 1956 "Opry" celebration as they had since the inception of the organization, but this time the group voted to break away from the WSM meetings and hold future meetings at mid-year in different cities. The 1957 convention was to be June 12-13 with all branches of the music industry invited to attend. There were to be clinics and conclaves for Association members and

⁷"WSM's Disc Jockey Fest Builds to Top C&W Lure," Billboard, November 10, 1956, p. 123.

a television show featuring country stars was in the planning stages, with the proceeds of the show going to the CMDJA.⁸

That 1957 CMDJA convention never materialized. The organization disbanded, leaving a sour taste on the tongues of several of the members. Biff Collie, who was still playing country music on the radio in Houston at the time, recalls what happened.

I don't think it is any secret, anybody who knows...somebody played the members for suckers and took whatever money that was in it. There wasn't that much money involved really, but the Association never put out any newsletters or other material, so there was a couple or three thousand dollars that went somewhere. The Association just dissolved before the planned summer meeting in 1957.⁹

The failure of the CMDJA matters little in retrospect. The mere fact this organization formed when it did, giving country music disc jockeys a place to meet and trade ideas makes the Association an important link in the development of the country format. WSM continued the annual "Opry" celebrations each year, attracting more country radio people with their programming and disc jockey clinics. And in 1958, the Country Music Association formed, so country radio people continued to have a forum for the exchange of ideas.

⁸"C&W Dee jays Vote to Go Independent," Billboard, November 17, 1956, p. 18.

⁹Interview with Biff Collie.

The All-Country Radio Station

The Country Music Association defines an all-country radio station as being one that devotes 80 percent of its programming to country music.¹⁰ In 1949 very few radio operators were considering devoting that much time to one type of music. Loyal King, owner and general manager of Pasadena, California station KXLA, and his program director Dick Schofield were certainly not considering the idea that early. But before the year ended KXLA was "the nation's first twenty-four hour country radio station."¹¹

Dick Schofield went to work at KXLA in 1947 as program director, announcer, newsman, and eventually he was sales manager. He recalls how the station backed into the all-country sound:

We had some so-called hillbilly programs on the station that were enormously successful, and frankly, somewhat of an embarrassment to the management of the station. But the sponsors of those few programs were doing wonderfully well.

At that time at least 85 percent of the population in Los Angeles had migrated there from the midwest and south. So there was great demand for this music that we were supplying and we didn't really know that ourselves at the time.

The station was not doing very well financially, and when a sponsor would give us a termination notice, I would go out to see him and try to talk

¹⁰"The 1978 Country Music Radio Station List," prepared by the Country Music Association, Inc. 1978.

¹¹Telephone interview with Dick Schofield, owner and general manager KKIS, Pittsburg, California, 15 February 1979.

him into staying on the station. He would usually say, "No! Not unless you can get me one of those hillbilly shows that you people have on. Look up the street at my competitor. He's got more business than he can handle. He's sponsoring one of those hillbilly shows and here I'm dying! If you can get me one of those shows, I'll stay on."

Well, in deference to economic pressure we would add one of those hillbilly programs for this guy, and he would begin to enjoy the fruits of that success. Gradually, we added more and more country music programs, just one at a time. All of a sudden our schedule was about 65 to 75 percent country music programming. One day I just looked at the old man [King] and said, "Why not, let's do it!" We went 100 percent country and that was in 1949.¹²

The format of KXLA was quite different from today's all-country station. About one-third of the programming was live and hosted by personalities such as Cliffie Stone.

My show [11:30A.M. to 12:30P.M. Monday through Friday] was like the Johnny Carson show or any talk show on television is today. I sat at a desk and talked to my guests. Then they would get up and sing a couple of numbers.

We had staff announcers who played records until somebody like me came in with a half-hour or hour program. Then the staff announcer was not heard from until the program was finished.¹³

The overall sound of the station in the first few years was quite "downhome," no doubt reflecting the style of the popular barn dances. Dick Schofield, who was at KXLA until 1957 recalls that the station's

¹²Interview with Dick Schofield.

¹³Telephone interview with Cliffie Stone, head of the country music division for A.T.V. Music, Hollywood, California, 15 February 1979.

earliest announcers sounded like typical hillbillies.

But with Charlie Williams and people like that came the personality sound. They could communicate with the audience without talking hillbilly. All of my radio background was major market. I just happened to grow up in Texas and Oklahoma. And my own concept was that you couldn't communicate with this audience by talking hillbilly. To people who love country music, the worst thing is a phony hillbilly. We began to refine that concept the last couple of years I was at KXLA.¹⁴

Dick Schofield, Loyal King and KXLA are not generally given credit within the industry for being the first all-country station in America. While Los Angeles may have been populated with many country music fans, it is not an area one generally associates with country music. The country industry grew out of the southeast and made Nashville its home. California was quite a distance from Nashville, and there was very little correspondence between those two areas, especially in the late forties and early fifties.

KXLA did receive some national recognition in the mid-fifties for its popular "Hometown Jamboree," and a couple of the station's announcers were usually mentioned in Billboard's annual country disc jockey poll. But aside from some advertisements in Sponsor magazine and the brief references to the station in Billboard, very little was ever printed about KXLA. In turn, the station made little attempt on its own

¹⁴Interview with Dick Schofield.

to gain a share of the national spotlight.

Schofield admits to never having been involved in the Country Music Disc Jockeys Association nor the first few "Grand Ole Opry" celebrations. The station was simply too involved in promoting and selling its unique product in Los Angeles to get involved with the rest of the industry.¹⁵

Cliffie Stone began his career on KXLA in the forties and remembers 1949 as the year the station finally began programming 100 percent country music.

We could have cared less about Nashville at that time. All they had was WSM and the "Grand Ole Opry." The rest of it was just hype.¹⁶

As a result, it is very likely no one outside KXLA's domain knew the station was programming all-country by 1949. Still, Stone has never been surprised by the lack of recognition for KXLA.

There has always been, by the rest of the country, a sort of a plan to totally ignore what is happening on the west coast in the country music business. The CMA hardly recognizes anybody out here and that has been true down through the years. I've been here all my life, in country music for forty years, and I've fought it all that time.¹⁷

Country Disc Jockey Hall of Famer Joe Allison started working as a disc jockey at KXLA in 1952 and

¹⁵Interview with Dick Schofield.

¹⁶Interview with Cliffie Stone.

¹⁷Ibid.

he remembers the station having been all-country for a few years prior to his arrival. He echoes Stone's comments about the lack of recognition for KXLA.

The people in Nashville don't even recognize that California even exists. They really still don't. They're real nice to them and attend their functions, but it's really just lip service. They go just so the people out there won't say they're being ignored. I may sound a little anti-CMA and I'm not. They're just the only game in town, and it, like any other organization, is going to have its faults.

Mr. King was quite a guy, a little eccentric, but real proud of his station. He used to come to Nashville and stand in the old Andrew Jackson Hotel and grab people and holler, "We have a country station! I have Tennessee Ernie Ford!" and nobody would pay any attention to him. In fact, they would run from him.¹⁸

Nashville music executive Charlie Williams joined KXLA as a disc jockey in 1956, unaware that the station had been all-country for seven years. He basically agrees with Stone and Allison about why the station is not generally recognized as a pioneer.

I think it has always been true that Nashville always ignored California, mainly because someone did such a great P.R. job on Nashville. Dick Schofield was a very meticulous man, and if he said the station was country by 1949--it was.¹⁹

Biff Collie, who left Texas for California and a job at KXLA in 1957, was not aware that KXLA had been all-country as early as 1949, and Collie

¹⁸Telephone interview with Joe Allison, former disc jockey, programmer, consultant, Nashville, Tennessee, 23 February 1979.

¹⁹Telephone interview with Charlie Williams, Willie Nelson Publishing, Nashville, Tennessee, 16 February 1979.

had been actively involved in country radio since the late forties. He just assumed that the station was block-programmed like most other stations at that time.²⁰

The "Folk Talent and Tunes" column in Billboard that Collie read so avidly had no effect in spreading the word about KXLA. Schofield remembers the column, "but I think it must have been of more influence in the east and midwest than on the west coast."²¹

Although KXLA may well have been the nation's first all-country radio station, the impact that station had on the development of country radio can best be described as minimal. Few people outside the immediate area knew of the station's programming, making it easy to see why KXLA did not influence other stations.

The station continued to have success locally until Schofield left in 1957. Two years later, Loyal King sold KXLA due to failing health and the new owners changed the format of the station to rock.

Long Beach radio station KFOX was struggling to find a niche in the Los Angeles market when Charlie Williams and KXLA salesman Frank Simon offered them the entire country package from KXLA, which included air personalities, salesmen and within a short period of time, Dick Schofield.

²⁰Interview with Biff Collie.

²¹Interview with Dick Schofield.

KFOX hired most of the KXLA crew, hired Schofield as sales manager and from that point began having an impact in the development and refinement of the country format. So the contribution KXLA made to the country radio industry was not really felt outside of Los Angeles until KFOX adopted the people and formulas of KXLA and began the refinement process in 1960. More will be written on the KFOX success story in a later section.

David Pinkston and KDAV

The man who is "fairly well accepted as being the first to program all-country is David Pinkston."²² He personally claims to have been the first to program 100 percent country music, on a radio station he co-owned in Lubbock, Texas. KDAV went on the air in September, 1953 and the station was the host of a party in October celebrating its opening. KDAV was to have "featured country music with an emphasis on local talent."²³

²²Telephone interview with Don Nelson, general manager WIRE radio and former Chairman of the Board-CMA, Indianapolis, 8 February 1979. (The CMA considers KDAV to have been the first all-country AM radio station. A spokesman for the CMA said it is entirely possible that another station was first, but simply did not get the word out nationally.)

²³Bill Sachs, "Folk Talent and Tunes," Billboard, October 10, 1953, p. 45. (It is important to remember these early country stations were not tied to playing the top forty or fifty songs and they did feature a great deal of live talent.)

An article in Billboard twenty years after KDAV went on the air describes an anniversary party for Pinkston and KDAV, calling it "the world's first full-time country music station."²⁴

Pinkston began his radio career as traffic manager of KSEL, Lubbock in 1946. In 1947 he took over a half hour country show called "Western Roundup" which was on the air every afternoon from 3:30 to 4:00.

In no time at all I was getting three to four hundred letters a day--they must have been able to tell I liked the music. Later I became manager of KSEL and the thirty minute country show developed into several hours of country music a day. I expanded the country music programming based on the response to the "Western Roundup." When I left in 1953, I felt like if country was that good part time on KSEL, response had been good from advertisers as well as the audience, why not do it all the time on a new station that I was an owner in? Of course, I did that and KDAV was the first all-country music station anywhere.²⁵

In 1954 Sponsor magazine began surveying radio stations to find out what kind of programming was being heard across the land. The results of the 1955 survey show KDAV programming ten hours of popular music a week. Pinkston says:

In those days, in order to get a license for a station you had to show the FCC that you

²⁴"Country Leader to be Honored," Billboard, September 1, 1973, p. 32.

²⁵Telephone interview with David Pinkston, retired, former owner of country stations KDAV, Lubbock; KPEP, San Angelo; KZIP, Amarillo; KPIK AM & FM, Colorado Springs; Colorado Springs, Colorado 29 January 1979.

were going to program to meet the needs of the community through a variety of music. We didn't know whether the FCC would let us get away with a format such as they do today or not. Back in those early days we didn't stick our neck out. We were playing 100 percent country but we were construing some of the country, the sweeter sounds and all, and saying we could justify it as being pop music if the FCC ever inquired.²⁶

Although Pinkston programmed KDAV based on the response he got from the "Western Roundup" on KSEL, he gives Billboard magazine and the CMDJA as well as WSM credit for helping to spread programming ideas around the country.

Billboard is without doubt as far as I'm concerned, the number one factor in keeping country music people up to date. We got ideas from other disc jockeys through the "Folk Talent and Tunes" section. There was no other with a national distribution like Billboard at that time to spread the word. They were the pioneer and I would give them full credit.²⁷

KDAV was an immediate financial success and Pinkston was eager to spread the word.

I generated a lot of excitement when I made an address before the disc jockey convention in Nashville in 1955 and encouraged stations to get on the bandwagon and play all country music. I had a tremendous response to that from people who wanted information on how it was working and details on how it was done. It kept me pretty busy for quite awhile.²⁸

By the time Pinkston made that address in Nashville, there were some stations getting on the

²⁶Interview with David Pinkston.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

bandwagon. The 1955 Sponsor radio station survey showed 1671 stations regularly programmed some country music. Four stations were full-time country, and there may have been other stations like KDAV, who played 100 percent country music but listed some pop music because of the fear of the FCC mentioned previously.²⁹

In the 1956 Sponsor survey 1956 stations reported scheduling some country music, and 12 admitted to programming 100 percent country.³⁰

The 1957 survey showed 15 full-time country stations, and 2024 others programming some country music.³¹ Again, it is necessary to point out that these figures may be low because of the FCC and the fact that not every radio station in the nation answered Sponsor's questionnaire. However, these survey results represent over two-thirds of all commercial AM and FM stations and do show the minimum number of all-country stations. But, there may have been more.

The Day Country Music Nearly Died

While the all-country music station was slowly growing in number, other formats, especially Top 40

²⁹Buyers Guide to Radio and TV Station Programming, Sponsor, part two, May 16, 1955, pp. 80-82.

³⁰Buyers Guide to Radio and TV Station Programming, Sponsor, part two, March 19, 1956, pp. 105-108.

³¹Buyers Guide to Radio and TV Station Programming, Sponsor, part two, March 30, 1957, pp. 83-85.

which featured rock and roll music, were filling the nation's airwaves. Although the evidence here illustrates some growth in country music programming in the late fifties, many people at that time were deeply concerned with the future of country music. Biff Collie repeated a comment that has been written and spoken many times: "In 1956-57 country music almost died completely with the advent of rock and roll."³²

Billboard writer John Sippel says the decline of country's popularity began earlier.

Country music hit a peak in 1950 through 1953 that has never been reached again. Country pulled its wings in the early fifties and everyone had to come to Nashville. The minute you get music written from one area only, it lacks power. The powerful songs today are coming from people outside of Nashville. Everybody going to Nashville was a deterrent to their creativity. Many of them became dry and sterile. Country music hit its peak, then rock and roll brought it down and it has never recovered.³³

Along with the decline in country music's popularity came a decline in radio's interest in programming the music. General manager of country station KLAC, Los Angeles, Bill Ward said in a interview: "All my time in radio has been spent reflecting the tastes in music

³²Interview with Biff Collie.

³³Telephone interview with John Sippel, former executive of Monument Records, presently a writer for Billboard magazine, Los Angeles, California, 2 February 1979.

rather than dictating tastes to others."³⁴ Rock and roll became popular before it caught on widely with radio stations. Today's disco craze has been going on for the past few years nationwide, but only in the last year has the disco format caught on in radio.

The growth of country radio slowed to a trickle after rock and roll dealt its blow to the popularity of country music. In 1957 there were over two thousand stations programming some country music according to a previously mentioned Sponsor survey. By 1961 the number of stations programming some country music was less than fourteen hundred.³⁵ This illustrates further how radio operators tend to follow musical trends rather than create those trends.

The effect rock and roll had on country music was as much an identity crisis for the country industry as anything else. Country artists began changing their styles in order to try and recapture what they lost to rock. In the process, many of them alienated their traditional fans. So country music became splintered--part resisting changes to appeal to the masses and the other part changing rapidly to capture some of this

³⁴Ken Griffis, "Bill Ward--Profile of a Radio Man," John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly, vol. 10, part 4, 1974, p. 179.

³⁵George Carney, "Country Music and the Radio: A Historical Geographic Assessment," The Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal, April, 1974, p. 25.

new mass market that rock uncovered. Biff Collie explains what resulted:

The sound of country music began changing in order to compete. The traditional instruments, steel guitar and fiddle, were being heard less and less on country records. The record producers had to and did begin catering to the huge younger market that came out of the post-war baby boom. The Anita Kerr Singers played a big role in the change. They were simply voices playing the parts horns would normally play in pop music.

You can credit Elvis Presley with nearly strangling country music and at the same time, with bringing it back to life. He introduced a country flavor to a lot of people and made that flavor socially and intellectually acceptable to lots of people.

When the Nashville Sound grew out of all this, country music began appealing to a lot of people who never before had been exposed to it.³⁶

By 1960 the country music industry had changed drastically and began trying to appeal to the youthful audiences rock and roll had discovered. "It was only when the people in Nashville recognized the younger people, saw that trend, that country music came back from the dead."³⁷

It was the Nashville Sound most people give credit to for keeping country music alive during those trying times for the industry.³⁸

At first the Nashville Sound was typified by

³⁶Interview with Biff Collie.

³⁷Paul Hemphill, The Nashville Sound, (New York: Pocket Book, 1971), p. 108.

³⁸Douglas B. Green, Country Roots, (New York: Hawthorn Book, 1976), p. 189.

Eddy Arnold recording with Hugo Winterhalter's orchestra. Then the sound was dominated by Chet Atkins' guitar, Floyd Cramer's piano, Boots Randolph's saxophone and Danny Davis' brass. The traditional instruments went out and the violins, horns and smooth background choruses came in. "Country singers became song stylists, and traditional country all but disappeared."³⁹

In 1962, Ray Charles went to Nashville and recorded some Hank Williams songs. One of them, "I Can't Stop Loving You," was the number one song on Billboard's pop chart for five weeks and was the sixth most popular tune of the year in Cashbox.⁴⁰

That song is marked by many as the beginning of modern country music. Country music historian Hugh Cherry says there were several steps that led up to the modernization of country music. The emergence of the Nashville Sound as well as the growing interest in folk music in the late fifties and early sixties were two important factors, but the Charles songs were the final steps.

It is my contention that the Ray Charles recordings gave country music an impetus in areas where it sorely needed it. When the album was so widely sold, it gave country

³⁹Chet Flipppo, "Country and Western: Some New-Fangled Ideas," American Libraries, April, 1974, p. 187.

⁴⁰Lillian Roxon, Rock Encyclopedia, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), pp. 572 and 602.

music some ears it had never before had and the music gained acceptance by those ears that had never accepted it before.⁴¹

Many other singers from other fields began going through country catalogs, looking for music to record. But Ray Charles is given credit for contributing to the universalizing of country music.⁴²

Programming the Early Country Stations

As suddenly as it declined, the popularity of country music, with the new sound building new fans, began to rise. Along with this revival of country music came a slow rise in the popularity of the country radio station within the radio industry. One thing holding back the growth of the country format was the style of presentation of most country stations.

Programming the first all-country stations was left almost entirely up to the disc jockey. The result was a somewhat inconsistent sound. The morning announcer may have been a fan of old-time country music, and he featured the old tunes exclusively. The mid-day man may have preferred the newer material and that is what he programmed, while the afternoon jock perhaps specialized in bluegrass music. In addition, thirty

⁴¹Telephone interview with Hugh Cherry, Country Disc Jockey Hall of Famer, Seal Beach, California, 24 February 1979.

⁴²Les Pouliot, The History of Country Music, (Memphis: 1970), a 36-hour radio documentary produced by Don Bruce.

minutes to hour length live programs would come on at various times, only contributing to this fragmented sound. There was simply no consistency throughout the broadcast day.

Although listener requests were one major source for a jock to use in determining his programming, his own personal tastes still had a lot to do with what records he played. The jocks were also influenced by promotion from the record companies as well as the country charts printed in Billboard.

In a 1953 country disc jockey poll in Billboard nearly 93 percent of the jocks said they selected their own music. Less than 2 percent reported that the program director did it for them. In determining what records to play, 71 percent depended on listener requests; 62 percent on their own personal opinion; 35 percent on trade charts and 13 percent on record company promotion.⁴³

David Pinkston left the selection of music to his disc jockeys.

Now, I had disc jockeys like Waylon Jennings, Bill Mack and some of the best, who knew and loved country music. I didn't dictate to them what music to play. Of course we all went by requests and we did have a hit parade once a week using what we considered to be the more popular tunes based on our requests and the sales at the local record shops.

⁴³The jocks were asked to select the two most important sources, therefore the percentages add up to more than 100 percent. "The Billboard 1953 C&W Disc Jockey Poll--Part Two," Billboard, February 28, 1953, p. 74.

We did have the personality jocks but we didn't Top 40 it like they're doing today, telling them they had to play certain tunes.⁴⁴

By the early sixties however, Pinkston had installed music wheels specifying a mixture of current songs with the hits of the past. The less his disc jockeys knew about country music (a problem that became more severe in country radio during the mid-sixties) the more Pinkston had to structure his format.

Disc jockeys at KHEY, El Paso (all-country since 1957) programmed their own music. Mike Oatman, who became program director of the station, describes how he formatted the station.

There was a skeleton format which said certain types of country music would be played in a certain rotation. The song itself was up to the disc jockey, but he had to play a certain category or type. We used a chart [of the current popular country songs] but it was only one category.⁴⁵

With the skeleton format at KHEY, the beginnings of what was to become a highly structured format is seen. Oatman was putting some consistency in the sound of his station by specifying when a certain type of song would be played.

In addition to allowing the disc jockey to program his own show, most country stations in the fifties maintained a "downhome" atmosphere on the air.

⁴⁴Interview with David Pinkston.

⁴⁵Telephone interview with Mike Oatman, station manager KFDI radio, Wichita, Kansas, 9 February 1979.

The jocks were friendly, easy going, coffee-slurpin' good ole boys with air names like Bailin' wire Bob and Pappy Dave (Pinkston's airname) and they instilled a good amount of corn into their acts. The country disc jockey was allowed to be a personality while the trend in Top 40 was to cut out the chatter and let the music roll.

The cornball acts apparently did not turn off the audience because listener response continued to be good at most country stations. Barn dances had success with the downhome style of presentation and it was only natural that the first all-country radio stations would continue that style. However, advertisers resisted buying the corn. Many of them felt no one who was lowbrow enough to listen to country music would use their "sophisticated" product.

While it is true Pinkston's Texas radio stations made money and so did many others, these stations were generally in small to medium markets. Large market stations depend on regional and national advertising for much of their revenue. And it was the large agencies and national accounts who refused to buy country stations.

Dick Schofield left KXLA in 1957, disappointed in his attempts to get the national advertising he wanted for the station.

We had a fairly schlocky kind of sponsorship

and I was frustrated that I could not upgrade the sponsorship and upgrade the rates to my satisfaction.⁴⁶

Local advertisers were easier to win over and smaller market stations like Pinkston's could exist on local income.

Before the country format could grow and expand into the metropolitan areas, something would have to happen to break advertiser resistance. This is in no way intended to be criticism of the way early stations were programmed, but with today's hindsight, several country radio people agree that it was not until management took programming out of the hands of the disc jockey and took most of the corn out of the personality that country radio began having an impact in the marketplace--particularly in the larger markets.

The Country Music Association

In 1958, after the demise of the Country Music Disc Jockeys Association, the Country Music Association was born at the thirty-third anniversary of the "Grand Ole Opry" in Nashville. The CMA was created primarily to promote country music. To accomplish that goal, the Association began promoting the idea of all-country radio stations to the industry. And since advertising resistance was one of the major obstacles facing an

⁴⁶Interview with Dick Schofield.

operator who switched to the country format, the CMA had to adopt as its third goal fighting this reluctance of national advertisers to placing ads on a country station.

Many people credit the CMA for giving country music a promotional boost when it needed it the most as well as aiding the all-country radio station in its attempt to become a viable force in the marketplace. Former Chairman of the Board of the CMA, Don Nelson credits the organization with being

...totally and single-handedly responsible for the growth of country music radio. Country is the only format that has a major budget devoted to furthering the particular format. There is no rock music association, or disco association.⁴⁷

Country music had an image problem and the CMA was formed to try and deal with that problem. Nelson explains:

It was put together by a bunch of people who knew they had a good thing going but were all considered to be a bunch of dumb hillbillies from Nashville. They simply had to get exposure in areas out of the south.

Joe Talbot, who was president of the CMA last year, wanted the job of executive secretary when they first started. He wasn't hired, but what he had wanted to do was get in his 1957 Chevrolet and drive around to every radio station in America and try to convince them to play country music.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Interview with Don Nelson.

⁴⁸Ibid.

By 1960, the CMA had over six hundred members and twenty-five organizational memberships. In a speech at the "Grand Ole Opry" festival, retiring president Connie B. Gay called for an invasion of Madison Avenue to get advertisers to buy country radio. He said many stations had changed to a country format and more were in the process of changing. Gay credited the Association with helping bring about the changes.⁴⁹

An editorial in Billboard's annual (1960) "Spotlight on Country and Western Music and Talent" section reported that the country industry was beginning to see new heights. "The future of country music reaches to the most outlying horizons. The art form has proven too vigorous to remain a small, self-contained culture; and the development of communications has speeded its expansion to new boundaries."⁵⁰

Calling on the country industry to accept change in order to continue to grow, Billboard called the two previous years a period of real growth and a dynamic period in the industry. It was no coincidence that the two years mentioned in the Billboard editorial were also the first two years of the CMA's existence.

The Country Music Association was an important

⁴⁹Paul Ackerman, "Gay Urges Crash Program for CMA," Billboard, November 7, 1960, p. 3+.

⁵⁰"Time to Rejoice," editorial, Billboard, October 31, 1960, p. 23.

link in the development and spread of the country format. The fact that it was created during a very difficult time for country music was no accident and made the CMA even more important. As much as rock and roll caused country music's fall, the CMA was responsible for its subsequent rise in popularity.

Changes in the country musical styles in the late fifties and the birth of the Country Music Association were two very important factors causing country music to become more acceptable and appealing to the public. However, other factors were just as responsible for the acceptance of the country format on a wider scale and on larger market radio stations. Those factors will be examined next.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ACCEPTANCE AND SUCCESS OF THE FORMAT

There were nearly one-thousand more commercial radio stations in 1960 than there were in 1955. Over eleven-hundred more were added by 1965. This growth in the number of radio stations continued the pattern of audience fragmentation that began after World War II.

The Top 40 format had become very popular by the early sixties, featuring the forty most popular rock songs, heavy on-air promotion, jingles and little chatter from the disc jockeys. But there is a limit to the number of stations in a market that can feature the same format, and Top 40 was beginning to reach a saturation point. Some stations that were floundering with the Top 40 sound because of increased competition, began looking for a different way to make money. A few of those unsuccessful Top 40 stations and others that were in trouble simply because of the increase in the number of stations, tried country music.

Refinement of the Format

Country music had begun its comeback in popularity and the Country Music Association had been urging stations

to change to the all-country format since 1958. In 1961, the CMA listed eighty-one stations as full-time country.¹

Long Beach, California radio station KFOX began programming country music in the late fifties and hired several people from KXLA in 1959. Dick Schofield, (who has been mentioned previously as sales manager of KXLA) was hired as sales manager and he later became general manager of KFOX. He remembers the station being in a transitional period when he was hired in 1959.

There was a lot of weird backroom corporate stuff that was going on. It was so unlike what I had been told, that I had given notice that I was going to take a quick walk away from it. Then we heard Edgar Sonderling was going to buy the station, but that didn't really mean much either, because he was associated with black stations and I assumed we'd all be wearing black-face in a couple of days. But I met with Mr. Sonderling and he told me the only reason he was buying the station was if I would stay on and if we kept it country. I told him I thought we could create some real mischief with the station and make a lot of money and that's what happened.²

Schofield had arrived at KFOX determined to get the amount of national business he was unable to obtain at KXLA. The last few years he spent at KXLA, Schofield began to realize the downhome style of presentation the station featured was a deterrent to his sales efforts. Once at KFOX, he began

¹Carney, "Country Music and Radio," p. 25.

²Interview with Dick Schofield.

implementing the concept he had started developing while at KXLA. That concept involved creating a more sophisticated style of presentation. When he became general manager of the Long Beach operation, Schofield was able to completely install his ideas with the help of air personalities such as Joe Allison, Charlie Williams and Biff Collie. They were all able to realize the advantages of a more modern style of presentation. While KFOX continued to be programmed by the individual disc jockeys, who controlled the music they played, this was one of the first instances of a country radio station taking the "cornpone" out of the presentation of its announcers.

At KFOX, we were simply a damned good radio station with superb people on the air, and we just happened to play country music. KFOX was never a downhome operation. The Deacon [Squeekin' Deacon Moore] came over with his specialized program for four or five years, but was slowly phased out because people just didn't dig that type of presentation anymore, and we couldn't keep it sold.³

Other radio stations were beginning to see the possibilities the country format held. Few markets had a country station in the early sixties, so competition would be limited. The problem most station operators had when considering the country format was one of image.

³Ibid.

The Marriage of Country and Top 40

Because of the "downhome" presentation most country programs and stations had, the format was labeled "hick" by many potential listeners but by advertisers in particular. There were many "closet" country music fans in the late fifties and early sixties who were ashamed to admit they liked country music because of the hillbilly image the music and the country stations had. Attempting to overcome the image problem, a few country operators began experimenting with mixing a Top 40 presentation with country music.

KFOX air personality, Joe Allison, was offered the job of changing KRAK, Sacramento, into a country operation in October, 1962. He had already begun to realize that the old-fashioned style of presentation and the diversity of sound created by jocks programming their own shows would never make a big dent in the urban areas, but was not sure what to do about it. He soon discovered the successful formula at KRAK.

The station had a union problem, and they couldn't fire the staff that they had. So what we had to do was take that staff and convert them to operating a country station. I had to come up with a format and a formula for people who knew absolutely nothing about country music. So I instituted a formula. We put a big round collar on the clock in the control room and marked off areas on that clock. When the hand on the clock was in a particular area, they had to be playing what it said there, like pick of the week, old-timer, album selection, or whatever. It was a simple formula that ran every

hour. That worked so well and made money so fast, that other stations started taking a look at it.⁴

The above idea had been planted in Allison's mind by artist Bobby Bare who told him of a kid who was dreaming of someday running a country station with a Top 40 format.⁵ Although Joe says he did not go into KRAK with that idea in mind, the end result was the same as if he had. Because of circumstances over which he had no control, KRAK became a tightly formatted country station without the downhome disc jockeys and with a very consistent sound. The station took on many of the same characteristics of a Top 40 station in that the music was controlled by management and disc jockey chatter was limited.

About the same time Allison was developing his format at KRAK, George Faulder took over management responsibilities of KCUL, Ft. Worth. Prior to Faulder's takeover late in 1962, the station had been programming old-line country music, including the downhome style of presentation. Faulder decided the time had come for a change.

We felt we had a nucleus of very hard-core country traditionalists for an audience, but we didn't have any particular numbers that amounted to anything. We felt by trying to broaden the spectrum of our music a little bit, broaden out

⁴Interview with Joe Allison.

⁵Ibid.

our base, that we would have an opportunity to acquire a more liberal listenership and it worked. We generally upgraded the sound of our music. While we didn't completely eliminate the old Roy Acuff, Kitty Wells type of records, we did cut back to playing one or two of those kinds of songs per hour to try and keep the old audience while trying to attract new listeners with the more modern Nashville music.

Country had always had a following, but it seemed like people didn't want to admit they liked country music. Well, things began to liberalize and they came out of the closet. But to be successful, there were a lot of ingredients, primarily, taking the disc jockeys out of the old Uncle Hector vein, actually taking the cornpone out of the country, and giving management very tight control of the music as well.⁶

What Faulder was thinking of in 1962 were some techniques that had been developed by Top 40 pioneers in the mid-fifties. For what may have been the first time, a country station consciously adopted the Top 40 format.

I brought in a young man by the name of Bill Ennis as my program director. He had been program director for KLIF in Dallas.⁷ At that time, KLIF was riding a high wave, but we were able to bring Bill over, and we just installed the ingredients of Top 40--tempo, jingles and so forth into what we were doing. The only difference was, we were playing country music.⁸

The significance of what Faulder did at KCUL is important to note. Although the all-country radio station was established before the Top 40 format was

⁶Telephone interview with George Faulder, C.K. Beaver and Associates, Memphis, Tennessee, 31 January 1979.

⁷KLIF was a pioneer Top 40 station, owned by Gordon McLendon, one of the inventors of the Top 40 format.

⁸Interview with George Faulder.

invented, it was the adaptation of the Top 40 format to country radio that began making country music attractive to more radio stations in the cities. From that point on, many of the people who were instrumental in the success of a country station in a large market either had a background in Top 40 or a good understanding of the concepts. And it was the adoption of some of those basic Top 40 techniques--specifically the limited playlist with management controlling the music, announcers with a modern up-tempo approach, jingles and good news operations--that made the country format more attractive to more listeners and, eventually, to national advertisers.

Many programmers were beginning to see the need to present a more refined sound than country radio had in the past, and consciously or not, many were affected by the earlier success of the Top 40 format.

Before becoming one of the most respected country programmers in the business, Chris Lane had been in Top 40 radio. But he was also a closet country fan. When he helped change KAYO, Seattle, to country in April, 1963, Lane saw the need for a different way to present country music.

I liked the music, yet I felt ashamed to say so. We went in with the idea not to apologize for the fact that we were playing country music, and not to water it down. The idea was to present it in such a way that anyone could listen to it and say, "I am proud to listen to this kind of music. The guys who are presenting it to me on

the air sound like intelligent people, talking to intelligent people." The initial impact of our presentation was geared to get a large audience.⁹

Lane says he was influenced by something other than his rock background once he began refining his approach to programming and presenting country music on the radio.

One of the first people I hired there was a man by the name of Buck Ritchie. He had been an entertainer for years. He could have retired, but was so enamored with the idea that I was presenting country that he came with us. He had a warmth and a way of communicating with people and yet not doing it in a way that he was talking down to the product or the listener. It worked. He was a huge success on KAYO.¹⁰

It was this warmth that Lane heard in Ritchie's presentation that made his style appealing and somewhat different from the approach of the Top 40 disc jockeys. The warmth, friendliness and sincerity in a country disc jockey's delivery is what the new breed of country programmer began looking for. KAYO may have originated that style, but it matters little who began that slight alteration. It worked in Seattle, a market many thought was too sophisticated for country music.

Many folks thought we were crazy. But we had been doing so poorly, we just changed formats out

⁹Telephone interview with Chris Lane, air personality KHTZ, Los Angeles, 21 February 1979. (Lane was five times voted country radio programmer of the year.)

¹⁰Ibid.

of desperation more than anything else. There was a niche that wasn't filled in the market, so we tried filling it. Three months after we changed the format, we went from number fourteen in the market to number three. Billing went from around \$150,000 a year to over a million in one year. Before long we were number one in Seattle.¹¹

Adoption of the Modern Country Format

Success breeds success, and because of how well KAYO, KRAK and KFOX were doing, Dan McKinnon at KSON, San Diego, decided to try the country format in October, 1963. He explains fairly succinctly why and how it happened.

Anytime anybody changes formats they give you a big song and dance about everything, but what it all boils down to is the fact that you're unsuccessful doing what you're doing. You're not making enough money so you're looking for something else, which is what we were doing. In desperation we tried country music. There were country stations around before, but most of them let each jock come in and do his four or five hour shift, bring his own stack of records, and play, talk or do whatever he wanted to do and the next guy would do the same thing.

We took away those options from the disc jockey and designed a format telling them what songs were going to be played and when, and how many of this and how many of that and how often they'd be repeated. We just did what rock had been doing--formatting it. Therein lay the big difference in getting ratings versus not getting ratings. The country artists were putting out a much better product too, which helped. But the real thing is formatting it so there was consistency. When you turned it on at seven in the morning, two in the afternoon, five in the afternoon, or ten at night, it was pretty

¹¹Telephone interview with John DiMeo, former general manager KAYO, Seattle, Washington, 6 February 1979.

much the same all the way across the board. If we were to get ratings, we had to have consistency.¹²

McKinnon's comments sum up very well what had been going on in several other places in country radio since near the beginning of the decade. KRAK, KCUL, KAYO and a few other country stations were attracting sizable audiences in the larger, more "sophisticated" markets using this new style of presentation. The key elements of this new style included strong news departments, jingles, promotion, a limited amount of disc jockey chatter, management control of the music and a shorter playlist. These stations were playing the fifty or sixty most popular, current country records. Many began calling it "Modern Country" reflecting both the new, more modern musical styles from Nashville and this new way country radio stations were presenting the music.

A slow growth in the number of all-country radio stations began that was to rise to an explosion by the late sixties and not begin to level off until the mid-seventies. By 1963 the CMA listed one-hundred fifteen stations as all-country with more all-country stations beginning to show up in other large markets such as Kansas City and Minneapolis. In 1964 the

¹²Telephone interview with Dan McKinnon, general manager KSON, San Diego, 31 January 1979.

number was 134 and in 1965 there were 250 full-time country radio stations in America.¹³ One of those new stations in 1965 was Chicago's WJJD.

The trade press considered WJJD's switch to country the big test for the future of country radio. Les Brown wrote in Variety that how well the station did in the next rating was to be an indicator to many people in the business as to the urban popularity of country music. He gave the station a chance, writing: "Some of the astute radio operators here consider it a sensible switch for a station whose position in the market has been eroding ever since WLS stole its rock and roll thunder. At a time when most stations are going for specialized programming, country music is as good a bet as anything."¹⁴

General manager George Dubinetz had plenty of confidence when WJJD made the switch to country in February, 1965.

In surveying a market, you try to uncover a void, and you try to fill that void. We went country based upon surveys that were made in terms of the popularity of country music and record sales. We saw tremendously high record sales while people were not even exposed to the product. It looked like it could be a sure thing.

The other element was, with our company headquarters

¹³Carney, "Country Music and Radio," p. 25.

¹⁴Les Brown, "Trade Eyes WJJD's Switch to C&W as Barometer of Nashville Climate," Variety, March 3, 1965, p. 55.

[Plough Broadcasting] in Memphis, being so close to Nashville, we got a pretty good feel of what the modern country was. Many people at that time were still thinking of country as the old barn dance kind of entertainment. As we looked at it, we found there was a lot of good product coming out of Nashville that would appeal to the masses and you didn't have to be from Appalachia to enjoy it.¹⁵

Dubinetz hired Chris Lane from KAYO to program the station and the rest is history.

We turned the thing right around and made money the first year after the change to country. We had no ratings at all for the first six months, but then we began to show up. At the time, Pulse was doing the surveys and you didn't need more than a three or four share to make money in Chicago and we'd get up to a seven share.¹⁶

With the success of WJJD in Chicago, came an attempt by WJRZ, Newark, New Jersey to find a niche in the New York City market with the modern country format. While advertisers and radio people were quite skeptical at first, "WJRZ was showing shares of five in Pulse ratings just a few weeks after premiering the country format."¹⁷

The initial success of WJRZ provided convincing arguments for the popularity of country music. The station's signal covered most of New York City, although

¹⁵Telephone interview with George Dubinetz, general manager WJJD, Chicago, 6 February 1979.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷"Country AMs Go to Town," Variety, January 19, 1966, p. 43.

it did not get out to Long Island. The ratings put WJRZ in strong competition for advertising dollars with New York powerhouses WNBC, WCBS and WHN.¹⁸

The impact WJRZ had on Madison Avenue is immeasurable. But, for the first time, major advertising agencies and radio time buyers were hearing a country music radio station. That fact is important in itself as there had always been great resistance by the Madison Avenue people to buying country radio. With the advent of WJRZ in 1965, they could hear for themselves how a modern country station sounded. (A later section will provide more details on advertiser resistance and what stations did to overcome it.)

Broadcasting magazine recognized the success many country stations were experiencing, remarking on "how country music is taking radio by storm in all areas of the nation--from Moulton, Alabama to Clinton, Illinois and from Honolulu to Washington, D.C."¹⁹

In another article in the same issue, Broadcasting pointed to the success country radio had in adopting the Top 40 formula, particularly in larger markets. While there were still many country stations that

¹⁸"The Country Scene-'67," Sponsor, August, 1967, p. 41.

¹⁹"Growing Sound of Country Music," Broadcasting, October 18, 1965, p. 69.

featured the downhome style of presentation, "the new country station runs with a tight format. Jocks go by the record charts, there is a minimum amount of chatter and the old 'howdy friends and neighbors' approach is past. The stations are claiming large loyal audiences and many happy sponsors. Almost across the board, stations that have changed to country have produced a rating and sales increase."²⁰

The Explosion of the Format

By 1968 there were some four hundred country stations in the nation, and the year that followed saw nearly four radio stations a week switch to the country format.

Mike Oatman, general manager of KFDI, Wichita, watched the growth in the number of all-country radio stations and was not surprised when the format really took off.

Some of the major market stations who weren't making it with pop or MOR or rock woke up in the mid-sixties. It dawned on them that some little guy in a country operation across town was sold out, had large crowds at everything he did and was very successful. Country became a viable format that you could go do and practically guarantee success if done for more than a year or year-and-a-half and done well.

A breed of operators developed who said, "Hey, we're a country station, but we're going

²⁰"Change to C&W Boosts Audience, Profits," Broadcasting, October 18, 1965, p. 71.

to run a good radio station." They promoted like everyone else did, they produced their air sound, they bought jingles and put people on the air who could talk reasonably well. It just dawned on them that country is just another format and you still have to do the same things that any good radio station does.²¹

Consulting firms began appearing on the scene helping radio stations that wanted to switch to country to do it successfully. Bill Hudson operated a public relations/advertising agency in Nashville when he decided in 1964 to form a consulting firm in addition to his regular company. He was quite successful.

I worked with around twenty-five country radio stations, combining a total package. I did their advertising, promotion, staffed the station and programmed it. I did KBOX in Dallas as my first station and it was highly successful. Then I took my formula to WDEE, Detroit for Storer, WIRE, Indianapolis and many smaller stations.

All I did was apply some things I knew about radio in general, rock radio in particular, in promotion, good tight formats and good professional disc jockeys and just used those basic ingredients for working with country.

When we went into KBOX in Dallas, Loretta Lynn's "Don't Come Home Drinkin' With Lovin' On Your Mind" was a big country record, but I wouldn't let them play it temporarily. I knew the agencies and everybody else listening were going to be looking for that hard country sound. So we went with Glen Campbell and the softer country for the first three weeks or so and we got people to say, "I didn't realize it but I kind of like country music." Then they could learn an appreciation for Loretta Lynn and right after that we'd begin to play any country record, no matter how hard it was.²²

²¹Interview with Mike Oatman.

²²Telephone interview with Bill Hudson, Hudson and Associates, Nashville, Tennessee, 5 February 1979.

When Hudson took his formula to Indianapolis, he helped put together one of the most successful country radio stations to date. Don Nelson, general manager of WIRE, explains what happened.

Country music always seemed to have a connotation of being only for southern areas, but through market research, we discovered there were a lot of second and third generation descendents of southerners here. We felt since many people here had a bit of a country background, we might be able to succeed.

We changed the format the day the fall Pulse started and we moved from ninth place to second place in ninety days. Soon we were number one and held that position for several years. That success created such a stir in the industry that it was probably responsible for a least twenty-five format changes.

You're seeing the same thing happen today with disco. It's very typical; there is always someone losing in a radio market and obviously they're trying to find something, and when they see a successful trend, they go for it.²³

Country radio stations were going on the air with great regularity, and most of the new stations were programming the top thirty, forty or fifty country songs. They were basically using the Top 40 formula with a little more mellow-sounding disc jockey--warmth and sincerity being the key ingredients for a country jock. Included in the format were promotions, strong news operations, jingles, in short; "the key to success for these new country stations was simply good radio."²⁴

²³Interview with Don Nelson.

²⁴"The Appeal of Country Music," Broadcasting, August 1, 1966, p. 53.

The music had changed and broadened its appeal. Radio stations had modernized the approach in presenting country music. And success stories were being written every week. One problem continued to nag the large market country stations, however. That was the resistance of national advertisers to buying a country station.

Advertiser Resistance

When Dick Schofield left KXLA in 1957, he departed frustrated at not being able to attract national advertising. When he returned to Los Angeles in 1959 as sales manager of KFOX, Schofield "was determined to get the share of national business that I thought was appropriate."²⁵

It was an image problem (again) that country stations had to combat. Mentioned in Chapter Three was the fact that smaller market stations were able to exist on local advertising. But the large market stations needed the national accounts to cover their higher expenses. If the country format was to be a factor in large market radio, the stations had to appeal to the national advertisers.

John DiMeo was general manager of Seattle's KAYO when the station switched to the country format in 1963. He discussed how national accounts viewed

²⁵Interview with Dick Schofield.

his station in the beginning.

National advertisers thought it was all hick listening and that our listeners were probably on the lower grade of the socio-economic strata. Our listeners were supposedly out of the mainstream and their buying power was lower, so they wouldn't buy automobiles and there were certain types of products they wouldn't use.²⁶

The situation had not changed very much by 1965 when WJJD took a country format to Chicago. General manager George Dubinetz recalls:

The local advertiser could hear us, so they weren't a real problem. It was more national resistance. The New York agencies, whenever they made a radio buy, on their estimate sheets they would have a section that would describe your format--Top 40, all-news--whatever it may have been, and they didn't even have a category for country. So they said, "Well, if we bought you we wouldn't know what to put down." The so-called sophisticated accounts wouldn't even touch us. It took a long time for us to break the preconceptions those people had.²⁷

The image problem was perpetuated to some extent by some country radio people who approached the agencies portraying themselves as hillbillies or cowboys.

Charles Bernard started a station representative firm in the mid-fifties, specifically to sell national advertising for country stations. Dick Schofield was at KFOX when he hired the services of Bernard's company. But the contract was a short one.

On my first trip to New York I met with this

²⁶Interview with John DiMeo.

²⁷Interview with George Dubinetz.

guy. He was from Brooklyn and he greeted me in a cowboy hat, cowboy boots and a big belt buckle. He had a huge nose and a Brooklyn accent and I said, "Oh Christ! You've just set country music back twenty years!" I fired him on the spot. He was an awful nice guy, but he thought that was the way to go on Madison Avenue. Well, I'd had previous experience on Madison Avenue and I knew it wasn't the way to go.²⁸

Bernard is no longer alive and it should be pointed out that he may have had some impact on Madison Avenue when he contracted with Pulse to do a survey of the country market in 1960, the first of its kind.

Sponsor magazine mentioned the results of this survey in a 1963 story on the country stations, concluding: "Advertisers interested in reaching a ready-made audience with substantial buying power and proven loyalty to sponsors should consider investigating this relatively untapped diversified market for sales results. Chances are it will pay off."²⁹

The magazine was not quite ready to strongly endorse the country format for its readers, but was at least willing to plant the idea of buying the format in the minds of the ad people who subscribed to the magazine.

Bucking the Resistance

After the experience with the Charles Bernard

²⁸Interview with Dick Schofield.

²⁹"The C&W Sound Captures U.S. Heart and Purse," Sponsor, May 20, 1963, p. 66.

Company, Schofield hired the Alan Torbet Company to represent KFOX nationally. They already had a good reputation and the name Torbet alone may have helped Schofield's cause to some degree. He insisted that KFOX be sold scientifically like any other radio station and began making pilgrimages to New York himself four times a year. Even with the help of the Torbet people, who got quite interested in country music and did a lot of research for KFOX, it was around 1964 before the station began acquiring very many national accounts.³⁰

In Seattle, John DiMeo had a few national accounts from the beginning on KAYO.

I remember Copenhagen snuff bought only one station in the market and we were the one. The beers automatically bought our format. Consumer finance companies would buy our format on the premise that our listeners were the type who would need to use their services. But we had a devil of a time getting airlines, automobile manufacturers and others like those to advertise.

Then Pulse began putting out a service called Local Qualitative Report. It broke down the audiences and types of audiences as to income, amount of money spent for cars, etc., educational background, what they bought and how much they bought. When this company, which was respected nationally, started coming out with reports like that, we subscribed. They proved our contention that our listeners came right through the middle of the socio-economic strata of Seattle.

But still, it took four or five years for us to convince advertisers that our listeners were in the mainstream.³¹

³⁰ Interview with Dick Schofield.

³¹ Interview with John DiMeo.

Down the coast, in San Diego, Dan McKinnon was experiencing the same difficulties in getting national advertising. KSON is credited by many as having had a lot to do with breaking down advertiser resistance.

We did studies of the country music audience for various accounts. For airlines, we'd go down to the air terminal here and do studies of people flying on the airplanes. We asked them what radio stations they listened to and were able to point out to the ad people that country music people did fly. We'd do studies at country music shows to see what kind of people were there. We found out country music people eat, sleep, drive cars, reproduce, anything any other human being does. And we'd try to get that across to the agencies. We just inundated the agencies with material they didn't have.

All the material we put together, we did in a very classy way, because out of a country radio station they expected some hillbilly, mimeographed, two-bit kind of way of doing it. Our image was very important. We ran around in business suits, not cowboy hats or boots. We were standard, ordinary people. We had a product, people liked our product, they listened to it, they'd respond, and the country audience is more responsive than any other kind of audience.³²

Demographic research was becoming more important to country stations. They had to show the advertisers not only that they had ratings, but the people represented by the ratings were a good cross-section of the population. Many country stations were putting on concerts and filling city auditoriums with country fans. Those concerts became a popular place for researchers.

³²Interview with Dan McKinnon.

In Chicago, WJJD had a live show called "Shower of Stars" and the station contracted with a research firm to do a survey of the people in attendance.

We would ask a lot of questions about income, home ownership and all the rest. We took this material to the advertising agencies and said, "Look, there's nothing wrong with these people. They work for IBM, Illinois Bell and there's nothing strange about them."³³

WJJD proved to the airlines--in a rather unique way--their ability to get people to fly. Northwest Orient had a promotional budget that they would parcel out to various radio stations, instructing them to use that money and whatever other techniques needed, to develop and sell a vacation package. The package would include a vacation to Hawaii or other far away place with Northwest providing the transportation. It was a good gimmick for the airline because it provided them with business. And it could aid a station like WJJD who wanted to prove to airlines their ability to provide results.

We took the first one with nothing to lose because no airline was with us at the time. The very first trip we put sixty-three people on at close to five-hundred dollars a person. Northwest Orient said it may have been a fluke, so they gave us another and another. Before you know it, they couldn't believe that we had beaten every other radio station around the country that had done this, except WCCO in Minneapolis. The last one we did, we had to stop accepting reservations

³³Interview with George Dubinetz.

three weeks before the tour. Once that happened, all the airlines came with us.³⁴

WIRE, Indianapolis spent a great deal of time and money sampling crowds at their country music concerts. General manager Don Nelson recalled doing some things to combat the advertiser resistance that today may seem a little silly. "We'd put on a show and photograph the cars in the parking lot to show that they weren't all pickup trucks."³⁵

Silly or not, country stations were doing everything possible to convince major advertisers that their stereotypes of the country music fan were wrong. But prejudices are not easily changed and in spite of the surveys, ratings numbers, results for local advertisers and other proof of the advertising strengths of a country station, it was the late sixties before a majority of national advertisers were beginning to buy country stations on a regular basis. Don Nelson sums up what has finally resulted.

We still get some resistance. I'll be making a presentation on behalf of the industry later this month in Connecticut to a foreign automobile which now has a bias against country music. But today you talk in terms of one or two problems a year that pop up on a national basis. Twelve years ago there were problems with nearly everybody.³⁶

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Interview with Don Nelson.

³⁶Ibid.

Audience Loyalty

Good numbers in the ratings, followed up with good demographic surveys, both played a large role in breaking down the resistance of advertisers to buying the country format. However, there is a phenomenon unique to the country station that helped as much as anything--that is, the loyalty of the country audience. For as long as country music has been on the radio, supporters have been talking about the loyalty of the country fan.

In a contest this writer participated in at a Colorado Springs townhouse development, three radio stations--the top rock, MOR and country stations--each did separate remote broadcasts from the development on three successive weekends. The goal was to sell townhomes, but the contest centered around how many people each station could pull to the location. The country station out-pulled the others by a two to one margin. Other similar promotions produced similar results, illustrating the loyalty country listeners have for the country station.

A 1963 Sponsor magazine article was one of the first indications that perhaps the advertising industry was beginning to recognize this loyalty. Springfield, Missouri radio station KWTO had been presenting country music in one form or another since 1932. Ralph Foster,

then owner of the station, said some of his accounts were over thirty years old and they stayed because the country shows they sponsored sold their products.³⁷

A Pulse study which showed KCUL, Ft. Worth, with a sizable audience also showed that 96 percent of the station's listeners never tuned anywhere else.³⁸

Country radio stations began publicizing their high retention rate of advertisers. M. Crawford Clark of KSIR, Wichita, said sponsors may not like the music, but they like the results. Eighty-five percent of his advertisers stayed on after their original contracts expired. George Dubinetz at WJJD claimed 90 percent of his customers renewed.³⁹

The Final Step

The country radio station, once considered to be a small-town phenomenon,⁴⁰ grew into the cities and was accepted there because of format refinements and the ability of those stations to sell national advertising. While the format was being polished in

³⁷"The Country Sound Captures U.S. Heart and Purse," Sponsor, May 20, 1963, p. 31.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹"Change to Country Boosts Audience, Profit," Broadcasting, October 18, 1965, pp. 71-82.

⁴⁰George O. Carney, "Spacial Diffusion of the All-Country Music Radio Stations in the United States, 1971-1974," John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly, vol. 13, no. 46, 1977, p. 62.

the cities, many small town country stations continued presenting the music in the "old-fashioned" style. Formatting a country station had become an expensive proposition, and small stations could not afford the promotion, jingles, top announcers and other techniques the larger stations had adopted.

With the development of automation and country syndication services came a cheaper way for the medium-to-small-market station to program the modern country format.

The syndication of country programs began in the late sixties and was widespread by the early seventies. These services allow a station that could not normally afford to pay the salaries of top country air personalities and programmers, to have them on tape.⁴¹

The adoption of country programming by syndicators marked the final step in overall acceptance of the country format by all segments of the broadcasting industry. Syndication has had no effect on the country format itself. It has simply given the modern country format a wider audience and at the same time, perhaps, created a larger audience for country music.

The early seventies was marked by further growth in the numbers of all-country radio stations. Some

⁴¹Interview with Chris Lane. His radio program is syndicated on sixty-five radio stations around the country.

of this growth can no doubt be attributed to the syndicators getting their country product into smaller markets.

The next section will explore recent developments in country radio and present the possibility of a rather dismal future for the format.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE STATUS OF THE FORMAT TODAY AND A LOOK AT TOMORROW

There are eleven hundred-fifty all-country radio stations in America as of 1978. The average country music listener is profiled as a middle income person. Nearly three-quarters of the total country audience have incomes between ten and forty thousand dollars a year. Today the listener might live and work anywhere. Half are in the twenty-five to forty-nine age range. The country listener is more likely to be a homeowner, own a recreational vehicle and take part in more outdoor sports than the total population.¹

These modern demographics give country radio stations all the ammunition needed to fight advertiser resistance. As was pointed out in the previous chapter, country stations rarely have to fight today for the advertising dollar the way they once did. But these demographics are still very important because of the recent trend in radio buys by the advertisers.

Once, major advertisers would purchase time on

¹Carol Sommer, "Country Is...", Radioactive, October, 1978, p. 12.

the top three or four stations in a market. Then they began buying the top rock, top MOR and top country station, regardless of the ratings. For example, it did not matter if the rock station was only the sixth most popular station in the market. If it was ahead of the other rock stations in the market, many advertisers bought it because they wanted to reach the audience attracted by a rock station. Today, while rating points are still very important, the demographics a station delivers has just as much value to advertisers. "Demographics are perhaps even more important to radio sales today because the medium is often a supplementary buy. It cannot match the sheer numbers provided by TV."²

Trying to improve on demographics, some stations began experimenting with the country format. A progressive country station featuring the "Austin Sound" and country-rock music was one result. KOKE-FM, Austin, was one of the first progressive country radio stations. The idea was to appeal to the eighteen to twenty-four year old, an age group traditionally not attracted to country music in large numbers.

Attempting to broaden the base of listeners, several AM country stations began experimenting with mixing modern country with soft rock music. Kansas City

²"Radio Programming: The shifting music tides keep station operators hopping," Television/Radio Age, February 9, 1970, p. 28.

radio station KCMO had some success in the early seventies programming the "soft rock of Chicago, Blood, Sweat and Tears, Carpenters, or a James Taylor with its current country selections."³

In St. Louis, WIL did the same thing as KCMO, even going so far as to hire KCMO's program director Dick Carr to program the station. Carr explained the idea: "The Nashville sound is changing. There is a significant crossover, and we are combining soft rock with commercial country sounds where it fits."⁴

A crossover record is one that receives airplay on both pop music stations and country music stations. It is a record that generally appeals to the two audiences for different reasons. Dolly Parton's latest record appeals to the country audience because those people like Dolly Parton and are her traditional fans. She can do no wrong in the eyes of most of those people. The same record attracts the pop audience because the song has the sound of a pop or rock tune. Those people may not even know who Dolly Parton is, but they like the song.

The other side of the crossover coin is typified by traditional pop artists such as Olivia Newton-John or John Denver who produce a country sounding record that

³"More Country Radio Stations Join Jamboree," Television/Radio Age, June 25, 1973, p. 30.

⁴Ibid.

appeals to some members of the country audience.

It is this crossover record that has taken hold in the country radio industry, and many believe the future of country radio and country music itself has been threatened as a result.

The crossover is really nothing new. Pop artists crossing over and recording country songs in the fifties and early sixties helped country music gain exposure and eventual acceptance by more people. Today's crossover is a little different, however. The cycle has gone around to the point where country artists are recording pop songs.

Doubts About the Future

KFDI station manager Mike Oatman is one of many people in the industry concerned with the growing trend toward the use of crossovers in country music.

Many of the people who are coming into all phases of the industry have their roots somewhere other than country and, consequently, cannot produce what we know as country music. Forty percent of the music produced in Nashville today is something other than country. There is a faster market in rock than country--which will take years to sell the amount a rock record sells in a couple of months.⁵

The trend toward crossovers is directly related to economics in all areas of the industry. The music people will make more money if they can sell their product to both country and pop record buyers. In turn,

⁵Interview with Mike Oatman.

many radio people feel they can expand their listener base by presenting the rock or pop records the country artists produce. While the country music industry may be correct, there is doubt in the minds of some broadcasters that the crossover helps country radio.

Exposing country artists to pop listeners may pull some of those listeners to the country station, but KSON's Dan McKinnon does not believe that technique works.

You can only get so much. When you put on a Moe Bandy those people are going to be turned off. I think you are deluding yourself if you think you are going to be the biggest and get more and more audience. [With a country station] you reach a point of saturation and you have to accept it.⁶

Sentiment among many country operators who have been in the country industry for several years goes along the same lines as McKinnon's comment. Country music will never appeal to everyone and ignoring that premise and trying to appeal to more and more people eventually will result in a loss of identity for both country radio and country music. That is a thought verbalized by several people in the business.

A major concern of many country radio people is the loss of the marginal country fan who would tune in a country station because he enjoyed some of the music. Today he can more than likely hear enough "country" music

⁶Interview with Dan McKinnon.

on his favorite pop station to satisfy him.

While there is still plenty of country music coming out of Nashville, as well as Austin and Los Angeles, the artists who are producing the crossover hits are artists who in past years have been big country stars. Country music award winners like Dolly Parton, Ronnie Milsap, Crystal Gayle, Tanya Tucker, and others are all artists country stations feel they must play because of their past success in country music.

In addition, many of the music directors, program directors and disc jockeys on today's country stations are not rooted in the traditions of country music and are happy to play more uptempo kinds of records. If those songs are recorded by traditional country artists, programming them is easier to justify. Many times the manager of a country station this writer once worked for would call and say: "That song didn't sound like country music! What are you doing?" The reply from the jock would invariably be: "Well, that's Tanya Tucker's latest." or: "It's off Dolly Parton's current album." An answer like that was sufficient and more than satisfied the boss.

The result of the crossover record is a slow homogenization of the music and the formats. Much of the music produced under the country label sounds more like pop music than traditional country. The artists

and record companies producing these crossover records are simply trying to widen their appeal. As a result, many country stations, using the modern country style of presentation, can sound much like a Top 40 or Adult Contemporary radio station when those songs are played. The idea that country music will eventually lose its identity because of the crossover worries WIRE's Don Nelson.

It is the biggest concern to many of us in the industry right now. Five years ago, you could come into a market, tune down the dial, and you knew when you had the country station. Today you have no idea what you have because Dolly Parton and others are being played on almost every radio station in America.⁷

WBAP afternoon air personality Don Day believes the popularity of country music has peaked and says it is partly because of the production techniques of the country recording industry.

The direction of country music in the past four or five years has led it to another cycle, and I definately think it is on the decline. I see more and more country stations switching more toward the middle of the road. Many stations are trying to straddle a fence, and they're having to play what record companies are putting out which is not country enough for the true country fan, yet too country for the rock fan. WBAP has slipped into the middle of the road. The ratings haven't really shown WBAP to be slipping much yet because of the other things we offer. The latest rating shows us number two and we've been number one, so I think it's beginning to happen.⁸

⁷Interview with Don Nelson.

⁸Telephone interview with Don Day, air personality at WBAP, Ft. Worth, Texas, 7 February 1979.

The rating picture for many country stations is not as good as it once was, and part of the decline can be attributed to the increased number of country stations in a market. Still, the recent changes in the music are much to blame for the drop. Former KAYO manager John DiMeo thinks there will be a decrease in the number of country stations in the future.

The real country powerhouses in the sixties are, for the most part, not doing as well as they were. KAYO certainly is not. In fact, the station could be sold in a year or two if it doesn't straighten out. Many stations that have traditionally been the bulwarks of country will eventually change their format. I think KAYO has a very distinct possibility of changing its format, particularly if it is sold.⁹

Former country radio air personality, now a music historian/lecturer, Hugh Cherry has a very dismal view of what is ahead for country music.

The changes in the music and the country station today have broadened the appeal, no doubt, but those changes are killing the art form. I think country music is in its demise. I see no hope for the future of country. Our society is becoming more homogenized and the music is too.¹⁰

Country traditionalists have been sounding that alarm since the Nashville Sound grew out of the fifties. "Modernization will kill the identity of country music!" has been the rallying cry for some time now. A magazine article printed seven years ago brought up the argument of the traditionalist. "They are saying now that the

⁹Interview with John DiMeo.

¹⁰Telephone interview with Hugh Cherry, Country Disc Jockey Hall of Famer, Seal Beach, California, 24 February 1979.

modern elements which, according to modern country boosters, have made country music America's second biggest seller in the record derby, will also be the source of country music's undoing. Country as 'country' will cease to exist, they claim."¹¹

The Opposing Viewpoint

So this fear of country music losing its identity and in the process hurting country radio, has been around for some time. Perhaps those who worry will be proven correct. But there are those who believe country music will maintain its popularity and even continue to grow, in turn, helping country radio.

While KFDI's Mike Oatman is quite concerned with the production of the crossover record and country radio's willingness to program those records, he maintains an optimistic outlook for the future.

I look for country to come surging back. Music goes in cycles, and country is just on the down cycle right now. Country music will stabilize I think, then come back strong in a couple of years.¹²

WJJD's George Dubinetz thinks the future is bright for country radio and the music it plays.

I think the more progressive country sound is going to increase the audience for country stations. I think these new elements of country

¹¹"Is 'Modern' Sound Hurting the Image?" Television/Radio Age, June 26, 1972, p. 21.

¹²Interview with Mike Oatman.

are going to grow simply because you're going to reach a group of people who have outgrown the real hard rock and are too young for 'Stardust.' As long as we're playing them more often than anyone else, chances are we will continue to increase this audience.¹³

Former WSM disc jockey Ralph Emery is deeply rooted in the traditions of country music, but he envisions only success for the future.

I think it's healthier than ever, and I think it's going to be better. The median age [of the total population] is going up and that is good for country music--we have very little to offer the teenyboppers.¹⁴

Emery is correct when he says the median age is rising. It will climb from 28.8 to 31.1 years old by 1985. The fastest growing age group between now and 1985 will be the twenty-five to thirty-four year old. The next fastest growing age group will be the thirty-five to fifty-four year old. The proportion of the population who are twenty-five years old or older will grow from 56 to 61 percent.¹⁵

As the population grows older, if traditions hold, country radio should benefit. Most of country radio's audience is in the twenty-five plus age span. Unless country music and pop music become more alike, which is

¹³Interview with George Dubinetz.

¹⁴Harry Morrow, "Ralph Emery: Country's Most Famous Disc Jockey," Country Music, November-December, 1978, p. 106.

¹⁵Broadcasting: The Next Ten Years, NBC Corporate Planning, (New York: NBC, 1977), p. 31.

the concern of McKinnon, Nelson, et. al., the country audience should grow with this increase of the aged population.

Mike Oatman has made a habit of studying lifestyles because he was constantly being told the country audience would not be replenished when the generation raised on rock began reaching adulthood.

A person begins having a change in his lifestyle when he hits his mid-twenties. He is no longer as influenced by peer pressure as he was a few years before. His musical tastes begin to change. Rock or hard rock no longer appeals to him and he'll settle down into either soft, mellow rock or country.

When I get calls from people who don't sound old, I'll ask how old they are and they'll say twenty-five, twenty-six or twenty-seven. Then I'll ask if they've always listened to country and the answer generally is, "No, I just got into it the last few months." We have a lot of real young kids who listen, maybe because their parents listen, but when they hit eleven or twelve, they start doing the peer thing and rock is it. But eventually they grow out of it and grow back into something less trendy, and country is many times it.¹⁶

National program director for Storer Broadcasting and program director of New York country station WHN, Ed Salamon, contends country radio has, to some extent, replaced the old-line MOR stations. He says true MOR music no longer exists and country has taken its place.

During the sixties, there existed music made strictly for adults, without any pretense toward mass appeal to include teenagers. Then labels began dropping those artists when they quit having hits. The newer 'adult contemporary' music was too much slanted toward a teen appeal for many

¹⁶Interview with Mike Oatman.

twenty-five to forty-nine year olds.¹⁷

Country music is one of the few radio formats that has traditionally catered strictly to adult listeners. Mike Oatman places particular emphasis on that point.

I don't even try to attract the eighteen to twenty-four audience. I think that's a dead horse. It has to do with lifestyles again. For a person that age, country music just does not generally fit his lifestyle. His friends don't listen to country so he doesn't. He does whatever is happening at the time.¹⁸

This is certainly a plus for the future of the format since the population is growing older. But the concern of many country broadcasters is a recurring one. With the artists and record companies striving for the crossover hit, they may alienate some of the adult listeners while trying to appeal to the younger listener. Country music could find itself falling by the wayside like the true MOR music has.

As is the case with practically every aspect of American society it is nearly impossible to predict the future. Demographic and economic forecasts paint a rosy picture for the future of radio,¹⁹ and especially country radio. However the problem several country

¹⁷Ray Herbeck, Jr., "Country Formats Find Place Amid MOR Vacuum," Billboard, October 21, 1978, p.wocm 32.

¹⁸Interview with Mike Oatman.

¹⁹National Association of Broadcasters, Radio in 1985, (Washington, D.C.: Grazier, Gross and Clay, Inc., 1977).

broadcasters have mentioned here with respect to the identity crisis of country music could materialize. If it does, there may in the future be only one kind of mass appeal music--Hugh Cherry referred to it as simply "music."²⁰

But country music and country radio have had long, colorful pasts, and it is difficult to imagine radio without specialized forms of music. Country has weathered hard times before, and while there may be change, it will more than likely be change through evolution. As long as the format continues paying the bills, country radio will be around to reflect that evolution of country music.

²⁰Interview with Hugh Cherry.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Country music has been heard on the radio almost since the beginning of the medium. In Chapter One the various phases country radio has experienced were outlined. This thesis has shown that economics and the evolution of country music were both responsible for the stages the development of country radio went through. While there were other factors that affected the development of the format, economics and the evolution of the music were the two key factors.

In the beginning, country music was heard on the air simply because the programming of those first radio stations was--in large part--determined by who walked into the studio and asked to be allowed to perform. The first real format for country music was in the form of the barn dance. Response to the few individual performances of country artists had led some stations in the twenties to believe there was an audience for country music. They attempted to gather a share of that audience with the barn dances.

The musicians began altering their music when they discovered what sounds appealed most to the radio audience.

Thus began the refinement and evolution of the music itself. As the music evolved, it attracted more and more fans, which in turn, spurred on more radio stations to program country music. By the late twenties, there was enough evidence of a substantial radio audience for country music that competition for that radio audience began in various cities--Nashville in particular. There, four radio stations competed for the country audience, with WSM's "Grand Ole Opry" eventually winning out.

The success of these early country music programs eventually led to the creation of an all-country radio station. The earliest examples of the all-country station developed as a direct result of the success of numerous half-hour to hour-length country music programs or longer barn dance shows. At the outset, going to an "all-country" format simply meant adding still more of such shows.

At KXLA, the pioneer all-country station, economics played a key role in that station's adoption of an all-country sound. If the sponsors of the few country programs KXLA had on the air in the mid-forties had not been successful in selling their audience, it is likely the station would never have begun programming 100 percent country music in 1949.

In the case of other early all-country stations, such as KDAV, cards and letters and other audience response to a few country music programs that were on the air at

those stations or others nearby, led to their decisions to program all country music. The early all-country music stations were no exception to the axiom that no radio station programs a particular format unless there is some evidence that it will succeed. They all had reason to believe there was sufficient audience that could be attracted by country music and for the most part, they were right.

The forties and fifties were marked by more changes in country music. Pop singers began to see the salability of country music and began recording some country songs as early as the forties. Country music was slowly evolving into a more popular, mass-appeal type of musical entertainment. This evolution toward the mass appeal sound has continued through this day. But until the early sixties, country music was dismissed by many as being "hick" or "hillbilly" music.

Part of the music's negative image stemmed from the early country music programs on radio and the first all-country radio stations. They were noted for their hillbilly-sounding disc jockeys who did whatever they had to in order to keep the downhome atmosphere of the barn dance era alive on the radio. These hillbilly disc jockeys, for the most part, had the freedom to play whatever records they wished. The only restriction was that the tune be from the country repertoire.

KFOX was one of the first country radio stations to eliminate the downhome style of presentation. The disc jockeys at KFOX continued to program their own music, resulting in a somewhat fragmented sound, but the hayseed atmosphere was replaced by good, professional, "personality" disc jockeys who could say more than "howdy friends and neighbors..."

The result was a more economically-sound product. By alienating fewer listeners, KFOX was able to begin attracting the larger, more affluent advertisers. No longer could advertisers call KFOX a "hick" station when it featured some of the best personalities in the industry.

The success of a radio station hinges on the number of advertisers it has, which is generally determined by the number of listeners it has. As country music evolved, it continued to attract more fans, many of whom were ashamed to admit they liked the music. A few radio operators in larger markets realized a substantial audience for country music existed. The only problem was getting people to admit they did listen to a country station. If that problem could be solved, a large market country radio station would be an economically sound idea. By 1962, it was an idea whose time had come.

The refinement of the all-country music format began in the early sixties, when a few radio operators began applying the Top 40 formula to a country music radio

station. These people were determined to present to advertisers a good radio station, which just happened to program country music. As with Top 40, the control of the music was shifted from the disc jockeys to the management, and the concept KFOX had developed--taking the corn out of the presentation--was adopted. The result, when combined with other Top 40 techniques, was the modern country format. The modern format grew directly out of the Top 40 format and was responsible for the growth in the number of country radio stations and the subsequent success of those stations.

The growth in the number of radio stations that program country music exclusively is testimony to the success of the format. But leaders in the industry have mixed views concerning the future of the country radio station. Some are optimistic, saying the music industry's attempts to broaden the appeal of country music will, in turn, broaden the appeal of country radio stations. Others are worried that country music may become too much like pop music (in terms of sound) and lose its identity. They think that could kill the country format.

But all forms of popular music change as the years go by. If there is not change, that musical form will be more likely to fall by the wayside. Country music, even with its traditional and old-fashioned values, has always been changing and evolving. There are still strands of the

earliest examples of country music apparent in many of today's modern country songs. Country music continues today as a paradox of tradition and experimentation. The tradition provides roots, but there must also be change or the music will stagnate and the world will pass it by.

As country music has evolved, so has the country radio format. And like the music, in order to compete economically, the format has sought ways to keep from stagnating. Country radio is where it is today because pioneers of the format were not afraid to experiment and make changes when changes were warranted.

In all stages of the development of the country format, there were people who were concerned that a change could ruin what had already been achieved. Success proved those people wrong. This is not to say that because of the way things turned out in the past, these country operators who are concerned about the future of country radio today should not worry. But past changes were based primarily on economic considerations. And economics explain why the music is being tampered with today. The music industry is simply attempting to sell more records. As in the past, the marketplace will decide whether the recording industry is right or wrong. And, as it is with all commodities in this society, the future of country music as well as country radio will be decided quite democratically in the marketplace.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY MUSIC RADIO FORMAT

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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AN ABSTRACT

The first documented case of country music heard on radio occurred on WSB, Atlanta late in 1922. Country music during those first years of radio broadcasting was heard in the early morning hours when "the farmers would be up and listening." The more popular format for country music was the barn dance. WBAP, Ft. Worth, may have had the first barn dance on the air in January, 1923. WLS, Chicago started the "National Barn Dance" in 1924, and WSM, Nashville put the longest running, most famous barn dance on the air in November, 1925--"The Grand Ole Opry"--which is still heard on WSM today.

The Depression years were marked with growing public interest in radio and increased government regulation of the medium. Many people experiencing hard times longed for "the good old days" and country music appealed to the nostalgic feelings some of those people had. The barn dance continued to grow, in numbers and popularity.

During World War II, many people were exposed to country music, which had always been considered a rural, and especially southern form of music. But many of the training camps were located in the south which exposed

thousands of northern boys to the music. In addition, migration patterns, that had been developing since the thirties, continued moving southerners to the north and the west. As country music was a piece of southern culture, country music experienced the transplantation of a musical culture through population migration.

Out of the war came the disc jockey and records giving stations a less expensive way to program. As television combined with a large increase in the number of radio stations to fragment radio's audience, radio programming began changing from block to music and news.

It is generally recognized in the country industry that David Pinkston's KDAV, Lubbock, Texas was the first all-country music radio station. KDAV went on the air in 1953. This research has discovered Pasadena, California radio station KXLA was all-country in 1949 and may have been the first all-country radio station rather than KDAV.

The all-country format appealed to a few radio stations around the nation. By 1961 eighty-one all-country stations were counted by the Country Music Association. Those early stations were typified by "downhome" hillbilly disc jockeys and the programming of the music was left up to the individual disc jockeys. The result was an inconsistent, "hick-sounding" radio format.

In order to appeal to major advertisers and to become a viable force in large markets, some stations

began taking the corn out of the presentation and put control of the music in the hands of management. By 1962 there were some stations adopting the Top 40 format. Success came to those stations nearly overnight and that encouraged other stations to switch to this "modern country format." The success of this format has been proven by the large increase in the number of stations adopting it. By 1978, the CMA could count 1150 all-country radio stations and many others that programmed the music half of the time or less.

There is great concern in several areas of the industry today that because of the crossover record, real country music may someday lose its identity as an unique artform. If this happens, the country radio station will be a thing of the past. Many other people in country radio see nothing but a rosy future for country music and the country format. Only time will tell which of these two factions is correct.

